

Chapter 13: The Nature of Biblical Eschatology¹

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In recent times there has been within the Church a growing interest in the future and final events and in what Scripture has to say about the end-time and the kingdom of God. One writer speaks of “an entirely new era” and of “renewed interest in the eschatology of the New Testament”.² Another even argues that the only future open for theology in the contemporary world is “to become the theology of the future”.³ The Roman Catholic theologian Rudolph Schnackenburg represents a broad spectrum within contemporary thought when he writes, “Shaken by its existence in an atomic age and influenced by biblical theology and modern philosophy, present-day theology has seriously taken up the question of history and eschatology . . . We are prepared to hear and consider the eschatological message of Jesus”.⁴

The following comment from the German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, deserves careful thought as it underlies much of what follows in this chapter:

From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionising and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith [which] . . . lives from the raising of the crucified Christ and strains after the promises of the universal future of Christ. Hence eschatology cannot really be only a part of Christian doctrine. Rather, the eschatological outlook is characteristic of all Christian proclamation, of every Christian existence and of the whole church.⁵

Moltmann’s emphasis on the centrality of eschatology to Christian belief and his warning to the Church that the loss of eschatology “has always been the condition that makes possible the adaptation of Christianity and the self-

1 Abridged from two papers presented at three European Bible Conferences in 1977. Previously unpublished.

2 J. P. Martin, *The Last Judgment in Protestant Theology from Orthodoxy to Ritschl* (Edinburgh & London: Oliver & Boyd, 1963), xv.

3 Harvey Cox, *On Not Leaving it to the Snake* (New York & London: Macmillan, 1967), 12.

4 Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Present and Future* (Notre Dame: University of ND, 1966), 2.

5 Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM, 1967), 16.

surrender of faith”⁶ are surely of significance at the present time.

Biblical eschatology can be summarised in terms of two fundamental principles:

1. Faithfulness to the whole of the relevant biblical text, both Old and New Testaments, including apocalyptic prophecy, and
2. Witness to the redemptive purposes of God as revealed in the ‘eschatological man’, Jesus Christ.

In what follows we will attempt to explore the rich content of these two underlying principles that make the eschatology of Scripture central and so indispensable to the Christian proclamation.

Faithfulness to the Entirety of the Biblical Text

The fundamental argument underlying this paper is that authentic, biblical eschatology is its breadth, its completeness, its wholeness, as a crucial element in the total revelation of God. It partakes of the essential nature of both Old Testament and New Testaments. It does not superimpose its own eschatological ideas upon Scripture. Rather, it allows Scripture as a whole to speak, and seeks to understand what is said by the application of sound hermeneutical principles. Such hermeneutic recognises the intrinsic relationship between the Old and the New Testaments in the area of eschatological thought, as in other areas of theological enquiry. Thus New Testament eschatology does not stand in isolation. It proceeds from the rich eschatological emphasis which developed in the Old Testament. Of this relationship John Bright says:

The New Testament rests on and is rooted in the Old. To ignore this fact is a serious error in method, and one that is bound to lead to a fundamental misunderstanding of the Bible message. He who commits it has disregarded the central affirmation of the New Testament gospel itself, namely that Christ has come to make actual what the Old Testament hoped for, not to destroy it and replace it with a new and better faith.⁷

It is this element of hope which appears as a dominant factor in the Old Testament and which, as we shall see, is then carried over into the New Testament. So we must ask, ‘What did the Old Testament hope for?’ ‘And in what way, and to what extent, did Christ make real such hopes?’ The biblical answer to these questions will demonstrate the eschatological relationship between Old and New Testaments, thus clarifying our understanding of the true nature of biblical eschatology.

Old Testament Hope

Bearing in mind the fundamental relationship which always exists between various aspects of Old Testament hope, the following elements can be detected:

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷ John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1953), 193.

The Assertion of Divine Authority: Eschatological Power

Firstly, it may be said that the Old Testament looked for a future assertion of divine authority. This hope for the realisation of God's authority in the world is in reality an expectation of *eschatological power*. We must begin, however, in the New Testament and the statement with which Jesus announced the commencement of his ministry, "The kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15).⁸ Christ's entire life and ministry, his teaching and doctrine, miracles and parables, death and resurrection, the gospel message *in toto*, are to be seen in the light of this seminal statement, specifically repeated by Jesus at such crucial junctures as the sending out of the Twelve, and again at the sending out of the Seventy (cf. Matt. 10:7, Luke 10:1). The context in which Jesus' life and message are launched upon the world, is that the kingdom of God has come. Yet he does not attempt to explain what he means by this statement. Rather, he assumes that a concept of the kingdom already exists and that it is well understood. Thus Herman Ridderbos states, "The expression 'the kingdom of heaven' was not unknown to those to whom this message was addressed, but was rather calculated to find an immediate response with them".⁹ The 'kingdom of God' was something they knew about and awaited.

Throughout the Old Testament the kingship of God is a central feature. "The Lord is King for ever and ever"; "I am the Lord, . . . the Creator of Israel, your King"; "For the Lord . . . is a great King over all the earth" (Psa. 10:16; Isa. 43:15; Psa. 47:2). God is the ultimate ruler over the earth and in a special sense over his own people, and this kingship is absolute. "Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, . . . and the majesty, for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and Thou art exalted as the head above all" (I Chron. 29:11). This majestic concept of the kingship of God is crucial to our understanding of Israel's theology and mission. But what does this kingship signify? There are two aspects. The most frequently used Hebrew word for "the kingdom" of God in the Old Testament is *malkuth*, the primary meaning of which is authority, as distinct from a geographical or territorial domain.¹⁰ "They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom and talk of thy power . . . Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations" (Psa. 145:11-13). The *malkuth* of God is the authority, the power, the rule of God, sometimes in the Old Testament extended in a secondary sense to designate the realm over which a king reigns, but almost without exception when used

8 Biblical references from the AV/KJV.

9 Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia, PN: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1975), 3.

10 A. L. Moore, *The Parousia in the New Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966), 7.

in conjunction with God, designating his power, his authority as King, an authority extending over past, present and future.

The second aspect of God's kingship follows. The God of the Old Testament is "the God who comes", the God who is present, who visits his people in order to accomplish his royal purpose and demonstrate his kingship. "The Lord came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; He shined forth from Mount Paran, and He came with ten thousands of saints". "Understand therefore this day, that the Lord thy God is he which goeth over before thee" (Deut. 33:2; 9:3). The God who is King, who has authority, is an active God, an involved God. The God who is King does not remain in heaven – he comes to visit his people, to bless and to judge, to heal and to smite, to rebuke and to forgive, to be presently involved in their midst. The first aspect of Old Testament hope, then, is that the future will vindicate the reality of God's kingship and demonstrate his authority.

The Establishment of the Kingdom: An Eschatological Perspective

Secondly, Old Testament hope anticipated the establishment of a kingdom, an event to be realised at the consummation of history. In this may be seen the development of an *eschatological perspective*. The Old Testament is not satisfied with the God who "comes", the God who now visits his people. The God who has come is also the God who will come. "Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad . . . before the Lord: for He cometh to judge the earth: He shall judge the world with righteousness, and His people with truth" (Psa. 96:11-13). "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion: for, lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the Lord. And many nations shall be joined to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people: and I will dwell in the midst of thee" (Zech. 2:10, 11). The God who has visited his people at certain specific times in history, through actual events, will do so again in the future. Thus "the day of the Lord" is a central theme in the message of the prophets. God has acted in the past, he is acting in the present, and he will act in the future. History, therefore, is essentially the history of God's salvation and we may "observe with confidence that events are moving toward a destination, an effective terminus beyond which one need not look".¹¹ There is a land flowing with milk and honey which one day will be ours; some day we shall be a great nation; God will cause us to live in peace and plenty; a mighty leader will one day appear whom all the nations will serve. The future always holds out the hope of final consummation.

So G. E. Ladd observes that in the Old Testament there is "a distinct theology of the God who comes":

God who visited Israel in Egypt to make them his people, who visited them again and again in their history, must finally come to them in the future to judge wickedness and to establish his Kingdom. Israel's hope

11 Bright, *Kingdom*, 30.

is thus rooted in history, or rather in the God who works in history . . . there are special times of visitation when his royal purposes find concrete expression, the most important of which will be the final visitation to consummate his will and bring salvation.¹²

This theology of a God who repeatedly comes to his people and who will come again at the end emphasises the importance of time. History has no meaning apart from time. In this context, the most effective visitation of Jahweh will be his final visitation, when his will is consummated and his salvation finally revealed. The *mal'kuth* of God will finally be established at the end of the historical process. The kingdom foretold in Daniel's visions of world empires is a kingdom which supersedes all earthly kingdoms in a time sequence at the end of history.

The Coming Messiah: The Eschatological Person

A third element in Old Testament expectation is the hope of a Messiah to come, a future Redeemer - hope which focuses on an *eschatological person*. Thus from the early promise of the Seed who would "bruise" the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15) to the Messianic prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and others, the purposes of God are increasingly linked to One who would come, and upon whom the realisation of future promise is dependent. It is impossible to divorce Old Testament hope from Messianic promise. He is the prophet comparable to Moses who will speak the words of God (Deut. 18:18). He is the child who, as Immanuel, will be God with us (Isa. 7:14, Matt. 1:23). He it is who, at the end of sixty-nine weeks, will make reconciliation for iniquity and bring in everlasting righteousness (Dan. 9:24, 25). He will preach good tidings to the meek and bind up the broken-hearted (Isa. 61:1). It is in this predicted One yet to come, this eschatological Person, that both the eschatological power and the eschatological perspective hoped for in the Old Testament find substance and reality. Much has been said and written through the centuries about Old Testament Messianic expectation and we do not need to linger here. The "Day of the Lord" is a descriptive and recurrent phrase in the prophetic books of the Old Testament, the emphasis being on the person as much as the event.

Redemption and Restitution: Eschatological Purpose

A final aspect of Old Testament eschatology is the hope of redemption and restitution - the redemption of man and the restitution of the world. Here we clearly discern *eschatological purpose*. Redemption and restitution are concepts which pre-suppose a primeval state unmarred by sin to which man and the world will ultimately return. But death and the decay of the world both stand in the way and both require an answer. The Old Testament recognises that these problems are crucial and that they are related. In Hebrew thought there is a fundamental unity between man and nature. The

12 G. E. Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom* (London: SPCK, 1966), 47-48.

earth is not merely the temporary stage on which man plays out the drama of his existence. It is an essential part of that existence. Man and the world are both the outcomes of creation; both are affected by sin and both are therefore contained within the redemptive purposes of the Creator.

With reference to the future of mankind, the Hebrew concept of human nature is essential to the hope of redemption. This monistic view of man's wholeness is not so much argued as it is assumed throughout the Old Testament, evident in passages which refer to death and the ultimate redemption of the individual. Man is a creature and therefore depends upon the Creator for life and being. But it is the Creator who becomes the Redeemer and man therefore continues to depend upon him for life and being, retaining his fundamental characteristic of creatureliness. The fact that man is a physical creature is not the measure of his sinfulness and therefore a state from which he must be delivered. The conclusion, in terms of redemption, is crucial:

Salvation for man does not mean deliverance from creaturehood, for it is not an evil thing but an essential and permanent element of man's true being. Salvation does not mean escape from bodily, creaturely existence. On the contrary, ultimate redemption will mean the redemption of the whole man. For this reason the resurrection of the body is an integral part of the biblical hope.¹³

There is no Greek dualism or Gnosticism in the Old Testament hope of redemption for it is redemption of the whole person.

Further, the world itself must also be included in redemption. The world is not evil *per se*. Though marred by human sin and consequently cursed, the world is, and remains, God's world. However, the curse means that, without radical transformation, it cannot be the scene of the final realisation of God's purposes. It, too, stands in need of restitution – a restitution to which the prophets bear witness in language which cannot merely be interpreted as poetic symbolism. The final visitation of God means the redemption and renovation of the world. God will create new heavens and a new earth (Isa. 65:17). The wilderness will become fruitful and the desert will blossom (Isa. 35:1). Peace will return to the animal world (Isa. 11:6). Sorrow will be no more and the earth will be full of the knowledge of God (Isa. 11:9).

What, then, were the ingredients of Old Testament hope? In the first place, it looked for the realisation of eschatological power, the demonstration of divine authority. Secondly, it demonstrated eschatological perspective, looking for the consummation of God's purposes within history. Thirdly, it anticipated the appearance of an eschatological person, a Messiah through whom promise and prophecy would be fulfilled. Finally, it was marked by eschatological purpose, expecting the redemption of man and the restitution of the world. Such hope shaped the Hebrew mind and gave it a

¹³ *Ibid.*, 59.

strong confidence in the future.

New Testament Witness to the 'Eschatological Man'

From the question, 'What did the Old Testament hope for?' we now turn to a consequent question, 'In what way did Christ fulfil Old Testament hope?' The following comment points to an answer: "The things which God had foreshadowed by the lips of His holy prophets, He has now, in part at least, brought to accomplishment. The *eschaton*, described from afar . . . has in Jesus registered its advent".¹⁴ The New Testament affirms that in Christ, Old Testament hope is both fulfilled but also unfulfilled. In him, God has partially brought Old Testament eschatology to fruition. In Jesus the *eschaton* has begun, but it has not ended.

Partial Fulfilment in Jesus: Fulfilment without Consummation

In order to observe this partial fulfilment we must first return to the declaration with which Jesus commenced his ministry "The kingdom of God is at hand". In both gospels where this significant statement is recorded the context reveals that in the person of Jesus, the authority and saving activity of God are immediately and recognisably demonstrated. He calls men from their work to become his disciples and immediately they respond. He heals the sick, casts out devils, cleanses lepers and restores the mentally unstable. What has happened? The kingship of God, the *malkuth* of God, has come. The authority of God over men, over demons and over disease is now being demonstrated. But it is only partial. It is not yet demonstrated universally, over all men, in all lands.¹⁵ Yet what has already happened affirms its reality.

Furthermore, Jesus begins his ministry, not only with the declaration that the kingdom of God is at hand, but also with the affirmation that "the time is fulfilled" (Mark 1:15). Scripture here and elsewhere is careful to set the coming of Christ in the context of time. God has now broken into history in the form of his Son. He has invaded the present time, yet without taking it over completely. A new age has come, but not yet a new order. "Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see", Jesus declared, "For I tell you that many prophets and kings have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them" (Luke 10:23-24). He can say this because something unique and unprecedented has occurred. "But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you" (Matt. 12:28). In Jesus the kingdom of God has now come close to men and in his person the kingdom actually confronts them, so Ladd concludes: "God's Kingdom, his reign, *has*

14 W. Manson, 'Eschatology', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Occasional Papers, No. 2, 1957, 6.

15 See *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1956), V, 318.

already come into history in the person and mission of Jesus”.¹⁶ History has taken on a new dimension, but it is still history. God’s kingdom is here, in time, but it has not yet superseded time.

Thirdly, in Christ the Messianic hope has also been realised. He is the fulfilment of Messianic prophecy and recognises himself as such. Commenting on Isaiah 61 he emphatically declares, “This day, is this scripture fulfilled in your ears” (Luke 4:21). On the road to Emmaus he interprets the Messianic predictions of the Old Testament with reference to himself: “all things . . . which were written . . . concerning Me” (Luke 24:44). *He* is the fulfilment. Yet not all the promises contained in Messianic prophecy have been accomplished. He has proclaimed the acceptable year of the Lord and preached good tidings to the meek, but the day of vengeance of our God is still future (Isa. 61:1). He has trodden the winepress alone, but the wicked have not yet been trodden down (Isa. 63:3). The government has been placed upon his shoulder, but the increase of his peace is not yet without end (Isa. 9:6-7). In short, the Messiah has come, but he has not yet accomplished all that is expected of him.

Finally, in the outworking of the Old Testament hope of redemption and restitution there is a similar tension between the present and the future. Jesus promises that the meek will one day inherit the earth. Redemption and restitution will finally be fully accomplished. But in the context of Hebrew thought, against which the New Testament must be understood, the restitution of the earth is linked with human redemption and the conquest of death. Jesus therefore demonstrates his power over death and the tomb, both by miracle and through his own resurrection. He who is the ‘firstfruits’ of them that sleep declares “I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live” (John 11:25). Victory over death is made available to those who believe, to those who respond to God’s initiative in Christ. Yet this victory is not immediately given to all who believe, even as all are not now healed. That is reserved for the future. At the present time, there is only partial restitution, in token of what is to come.

Clearly then, Jesus is the fulfilment of Old Testament hope. He demonstrates eschatological power; he inaugurates the eschatological kingdom; he is the eschatological person; he reveals the eschatological purposes of God. But all this is only in part. In Christ, the *eschaton* has arrived, the eschatological age on earth begins, and it will end at some time in the future. In him there is fulfilment, but without consummation.

Anticipation of Complete Fulfilment

How, then, did Old Testament hope, both fulfilled and unfulfilled in the life of Jesus, affect the outlook of the Christian Church? We share the view

16 Ladd, *Kingdom*, 140

that the underlying current throughout the New Testament is eschatological and that the New Testament cannot rightly be interpreted apart from its eschatological character. It looks forward as the Old Testament looked forward. But what does it anticipate? Paul, in what is a fundamental text, declares, "For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto himself" (Phil. 3:20,21). There can be no doubt that Jesus is able to "subdue all things until Himself". He frequently demonstrated his ability to do that while he was on earth. But he has not yet done so. Indeed, Paul speaks of the time yet future "when all things shall be subdued unto him" and "when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power" (1 Cor. 16:28, 24). Again, God has so exalted the Son "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth" (Phil. 2:9-10).

But in the New Testament, as well as in the Old, this has not yet happened. It is still future. The New Testament still looks forward to the final vindication of divine authority. It engenders hope that the future will bring the subjection of all things to Christ and the universal acknowledgement of his power. The demonstration of that power in the life and work of Jesus makes its final consummation more credible. It is, of course, true to claim that the New Testament has an eschatology with a character of its own, not to be explained as a relic of Judaism, but standing in its own right and in relation to God's new revelation in Christ. For all that, the day is still to come in which the authority of earth's rightful King is to be vindicated. The New Testament also looks forward to the unambiguous demonstration of eschatological power.

This is nevertheless to some degree only the introduction to what emerges as the dominant eschatological theme in the New Testament. Jesus, who came once in fulfilment of Messianic expectation, will himself come again. The authority which is to be fully demonstrated at the end time is *his* authority – *he* will "subdue all things unto Himself". It is *his* kingdom which is yet to be finally revealed. "*I* will come again", he said. "This *same* Jesus will so come", "The Lord *himself* shall descend" – these are the phrases which characterise the New Testament promises of Christ's return. The emphasis in each case falls on the person rather than on the action. Jesus, who is already the eschatological Person in a veiled sense, will be unveiled as the eschatological Person for all to see and acknowledge, at the end, when he comes again. All that remained unfulfilled at his first coming will be fulfilled at his second coming.

The crucial truth to be derived from the New Testament witness is that

it is not merely a future event that has significance, but a future Person. It is not so much the *day* of the Lord to which the New Testament looks forward, as the day of the *Lord*. The event does have immense significance, of course, but only insofar as it is related to the Person. Moore therefore argues in his fine study *The Parousia in the New Testament*, that it is difficult “to evade the conclusion that the New Testament as a whole works with the concept of a salvation-history of which the *parousia* is an integral part”, and concludes that “Jesus’ life, death, resurrection and *parousia* belong together as parts of an indivisible whole, as moments in the great and all-decisive movement of God to man now breaking into the world”.¹⁷ Here the end is not thought of primarily as an event, the terminal point of the age, but rather in terms of the completed work of the eschatological person. The redemptive work of Christ has a future because it has a verifiable, though inconclusive, past.

Together with the redemption of mankind and the conquest of death, the New Testament looks forward with equal certainty to the restitution of the world. Peter sees in the prophecies of Isaiah the assurance of a new order to come and uses them to substantiate his argument that this new order will follow the events of the last day. John’s sublime vision of new heavens and new earth is completely in harmony with the creative and redemptive purposes of God as revealed throughout Scripture and is essential for the out-working of those purposes. God did not create the earth in vain; he created it to be inhabited. That this eternal purpose might be accomplished, biblical eschatology looks forward to the total redemption of man and the total restitution of the world. Eschatology, therefore, will not stand at the end of the Church’s message as an isolated article of faith. It will stand at the beginning, and will shape the content of the whole. It will take its content from both Old and New Testaments and above all will bear its own unwavering witness to Christ as the ‘eschatological person’ in whom all God’s redemptive purposes are to be fulfilled.

The Essential Features of Biblical Eschatology

Since New Testament eschatology emerges from that of the Old Testament it inherits and perpetuates the same basic expectations. There is, however, another notable dimension. New Testament eschatology “is not to be explained as a hangover or relic of Judaism. . . . It stands on its own proper ground, which is the revelation made in the Incarnation, in the love and suffering of Jesus and in the new life begun in him. Christianity is determined by its own nature to reach forward to the consummation of the life in Christ”.¹⁸ The new dimension in New Testament eschatology is its witness to God’s new revelation in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, only faithfulness to the entire biblical text and the fullness of God’s new revelation in Jesus

¹⁷ Moore, *Parousia*, 90.

¹⁸ Manson, ‘Eschatology’, 15

Christ can together defend the Church from the criticism of being eschatologically unbalanced and deviant. Emerging from its claim to be wholly biblical, there are a number of features which characterise true biblical eschatology, and it is to these that we now turn our attention.

Christology

In the first place, biblical eschatology is evidently and strongly Christological. It is totally related to Christ, the 'eschatological Person'. By derivation, the word eschatology is the *logos* concerning the *eschaton* – literally the word concerning the last things. Traditionally this 'logos' has been understood as those doctrines relating to the future, the events which will occur at the end, including the return of Christ, the judgement, the resurrection of the dead and the re-creation of the world. By these events history will be terminated. While liberal theology has in general turned away from the literal view of a future which will culminate in specific events, such a view is still basic to traditional Protestantism and to authentic biblical eschatology. Nevertheless, we must ask again, 'What is the essential 'logos' of eschatology?' If Christ is the divine 'logos' of Christian faith as postulated in John 1:1-3, the 'logos' of Christology, the 'logos' of soteriology, the 'logos' of ecclesiology, he must also be the logos' of eschatology. Without detracting in any way from what has hitherto been regarded as the content of eschatology, we agree that:

Christian eschatology does not speak of the future as such. It sets out from a definite reality in history and announces the future of that reality, its future possibilities and its power over the future. Christian eschatology speaks of Jesus Christ and *his* future. It recognises the reality of the raising of Jesus and proclaims the future of the risen Lord.¹⁹

Christ, not the future in itself, is the true 'logos', the content of eschatology. There is no word about the future that is worth proclaiming that does not emerge from him and point to him. The "blessed hope" is much more than an event, however momentous that event may be. The "blessed hope" is also a person.

There have been few generations within Protestantism which have understood the Christological nature of authentic second advent hope more than the English Puritans of the seventeenth century. Richard Sibbes, one of the great devotional writers of that age, preached and wrote extensively on the theme of Christ's second coming. We shall have occasion to hear Sibbes again in the following chapter and to sample his profound understanding of the second coming. Here we may just note that he understood it was necessary both for the individual believer and for the Church as a whole that Christ should come again. Also, and perhaps of greater import, Christ's return was for him more than merely an event at the end of time. For Sib-

¹⁹ Moltmann, *Theology*, 17.

bes, eschatology was directly related to soteriology. "The more we have of Christ in us", he said, "the more shall we desire his coming to us".²⁰ This is, as Paul said, "Christ in you, the hope of glory". The hope is not merely Christ at the end but Christ here and now. He is the hope of glory only to the extent that He now lives in the believer. It is the person of Christ who gives meaning to the event at the end.

It is not surprising that to Sibbes and to most of his contemporaries in the English Reformation, the doctrine of Christ's second coming was not an appendage to Christian faith, but a momentous truth at the very heart of their proclamation. Three hundred years later, theologians would again be talking of the person and work of Christ as having eschatological significance and there can be little doubt that Sibbes and his fellow preachers would have endorsed the view, "It is therefore right to emphasise that Christian eschatology is at heart Christology in an eschatological perspective".²¹ Biblical eschatology does not merely analyse the general possibilities of future history. It announces the future of Jesus Christ and speaks of world future in terms of the One who alone makes any future possible.

Redemption and Restitution

A second characteristic of authentic biblical eschatology arises as a direct consequence of its Christological nature. Since God's purposes for humanity are focussed in Christ, all will eventually be realised in him. He is the 'eschatological Person' of promise and prophecy, the One in whom biblical hope is both fulfilled and unfulfilled. Since Jesus is the eschatological Person, the eschatological age commenced with his appearance on earth when he began to fulfil promise and prophecy. Thus, the coming of Christ at the end is not only related to his first coming in a Christological sense, that is by virtue of the *person* involved, but also in a theological sense, by virtue of the *purpose* involved. All the events which are to occur at the end of the eschatological age – second advent, resurrection, judgement, kingdom – are, in a theological sense, a necessary sequel to the events which occurred at the beginning of the eschatological age – incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension. Biblical eschatology is redemptive in character because it is redemptive in purpose.

Many contemporary writers describe Christ's coming into history and his redemptive work as 'the Christ-event'. The Christ-event is the totality of Christ's work on behalf of man. It is not only the incarnation of Christ, his life, death and resurrection. The Christ-event also includes his ascension, his priestly ministry, his coming again and his future kingdom. It is viewed as a whole, rather than as a series of events. We can therefore agree

20 Richard Sibbes, *The Bride's Longing for her Bridegrooms Second Coming* (London, 1638), 84.

21 Moltmann, *Theology*, 192.

Without a fundamental distortion of its essential character, the gospel of creation and redemption could not be dissociated from the hope of the *Parousia* with all its implications. Christians must always look back in time to the event which is history's climax [the crucifixion] and which gives it its significance, and forward to the final event whose character is revealed already in the former.²²

The Christ-event is the total redemptive work of Christ, culminating in his redemptive activity at the end of time. So Paul declares in looking forward to this culmination, "Now is our salvation nearer than when we believed" (Rom. 13:11). The significance of Hebrews 9:28 is surely that it anticipates a conclusion to the redemptive work of Christ initiated on the cross and continuing now in heaven itself.

Without detracting from the immense significance of Christ's redeeming act on Calvary it is worth noting, as F. W. Camfield has reminded us, that Jesus' "life, death, resurrection and *Parousia* belong together as parts of an indivisible whole, as moments in the great and all-decisive movement of God to man".²³ In this sense, eschatology is wholly redemptive since it is part of the one Christ-event. Looking at the work of Christ from this viewpoint we are continually reminded "of the essential unity of God's saving acts in Christ – the realisation that the events of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and *Parousia* are in a real sense one event".²⁴

The preceding two statements remind us that while there is in theology a new interest in the second coming, most eschatological schemes jump from the resurrection to the *parousia*, ignoring the time which exists between the two. Biblical eschatology has no such gap. The New Testament doctrine of Christ's mediatorial ministry in heaven, foreshadowed in outline in the Old Testament, is also part of the Christ-event. It is the essential link in the chain, joining together past and future at a point where otherwise they cannot meet. The priesthood of Christ, developed in the book of Hebrews from the initial reference at Hebrews 1:4, "when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high", is to be seen against the background of Peter's assertion in Acts 3:21 that heaven must receive him "until the time of restitution of all things". The priestly ministry of Jesus is part of a continuum which proceeds unbroken until its consummation at the end.

Furthermore, eschatology can only be redemptive in the biblical sense if it involves the redemption of the whole man. The resurrection of the body is therefore also a factor which cannot be ignored. In the first hundred years or so of Reformation theology, the emphasis was not placed as emphatically

22 G. W. Lampe, 'Eschatology', 21.

23 F. W. Camfield, 'Man in his Time', *SJT*, III (1950), 133.

24 C. E. Cranfield, 'St. Mark 13', *SJT*, VII (1954), 288.

as it was in later centuries on the survival of the soul after death as the final goal of salvation. Due to the widespread and strong belief in the second coming which emerged in early Protestantism there existed also a corresponding emphasis on the resurrection of the body. Richard Baxter, another great seventeenth-century biblical scholar, may be quoted as representative of Reformation eschatology:

O hasten that great Resurrection Day! When thy command shall go forth, and none shall disobey; when the Sea and Earth shall yield up their hostages, and all that slept in the graves shall awake, and the dead in Christ shall first arise; . . . therefore dare I lay down my carcass in the dust, entrusting it, not to a Grave, but to Thee: and therefore my flesh shall rest in Hope, till Thou raise it to the possession of the everlasting rest.²⁵

It is quite clear that there can be no salvation in the full sense until death is finally conquered and the body resurrected.

The resurrection of the body at the last day is a consequence both of the Christological and redemptive aspects of biblical eschatology and is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Himself, the 'eschatological Person'. The literal resurrection of all who believe owes its possibility to Jesus and to his resurrection without which no such possibility could exist. It is to understand and to proclaim Christ's resurrection that provides hope for the future. In Cullmann's words, "It is no longer possible to say, 'We shall arise', without saying at the same time, 'Christ has risen'".²⁶ The resurrection is not simply a future eschatological event, but it is also part of the redemptive past. The connection between Christ's resurrection and the resurrection to come is neither wholly prophetic, that is to say a future event in time isolated from the past, nor wholly Christological, that is a past event in time isolated from the future. The connection is one in which the future and past are inseparably related. The resurrection of Jesus contains within it the necessity of a future resurrection for all who truly believe. Only then does redemption become an eternal reality.

Optimism

Also arising from the Christological and redemptive content of biblical eschatology is the fact that it is optimistic. With the apostle Paul who writes of the "hope of the gospel" (Col. 1:23) of "the Lord Jesus Christ, our hope" (I Tim. 1:1) and of "Christ in you the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27), it recognises that the essential ethos of the gospel is that of hope, directing humanity and the world forward to a better future. The New Testament further points those who believe to a "hope set before" them (Heb. 6:18), to a "hope which is laid up . . . in heaven" (Col. 1:5) and to a hope of resurrection (I Cor.

25 Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* (London, 1650), 837-38.

26 Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (London: SCM, 1951), 235.

15:19). Believers are told that they are begotten into a lively hope (I Pet. 1:3), that they are heirs of the hope of eternal life (Tit. 3:7), that they are to look for the blessed hope (Tit. 2:13). Similarly, the Church is called to account for her hope in the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6) and is committed to provide an answer for the hope that she professes (I Pet. 3:15). If the Church proclaims an eschatology which reflects the total biblical revelation, it will inevitably proclaim an eschatology that is positive and optimistic.

The significance of hope as a major outcome of biblical eschatology is its relationship to faith. Faith, being the basis of salvation, binds human beings to Christ by believing that Christ *was* and by trusting in what He has done. But hope is the inseparable companion of faith and binds them to Christ by believing that he *will be* and by trusting in what he will accomplish. Thus faith and hope cannot be separated either in theology or experience. "For by grace are ye saved through faith" (Eph. 2:8). This faith "is the confidence of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). Therefore Paul again declares, "For we are saved by hope" (Rom. 8:24). True faith and true hope are inseparable. Calvin described this relationship well:

Faith believes that God is true; Hope expects that in due season he will manifest his truth. Faith believes that He is our Father; Hope expects that He will always act the part of a Father towards us. Faith believes that eternal life has been given to us; Hope expects that it will one day be revealed.²⁷

More recently Moltmann perceptively commented, "In the Christian life faith has the priority, but hope the primacy".²⁸ The Church which proclaims true faith in Christ as the basis of salvation will inevitably also proclaim hope.

However, it is possible to hold an eschatology which is cataclysmic, negative, judgmental and hence unredemptive and hopeless. Such eschatological schemes have recurred in Christian history since the Reformation and stand as a sombre warning against the proclamation of any eschatology which is less than optimistic and hopeful. William Whiston once predicted the imminent end of the world. Whiston, a theologian and a preacher, based his predictions on prophecy and the appearance of an unexpected comet. The comet was to collide with the earth, under the direction of God, and thereby bring about the anticipated destruction of the wicked and the final fulfilment of all prophecy. For a few months Whiston's message attracted considerable attention, but the final comment must be that of Professor Perry Miller:

In London, when the populace realised that Whiston's comet had let them off, they expressed their gratitude by going into taverns and

²⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), I, 506.

²⁸ Moltmann, *Theology*, 20.

breaking up whole hogsheads for joy. They drank, they whored, they swore, they lied, they cheated, they quarrelled, they murdered. In short, the world went on in the old channel.²⁹

The conclusion, as Miller rightly judges, is that men cannot be scared into virtue. A pessimistic eschatology is not only unbiblical, it is pointless. It has no purpose and, being unredemptive, is therefore without hope.

The sombre lesson which emerges from this type of eschatology is that it is not only sterile – it is also self-defeating and self-destructive. Whiston, who was a contemporary of Sir Isaac Newton, had the opportunity of partaking of the wholeness which characterised most of the eschatological thought of his time. Similarly, the Fifth Monarchy movement, which announced the imminent end in terms of prophetic fulfilment bringing destruction to the present order, lasted for forty or fifty years. Today, both Whiston and the Fifth Monarchy Men are remembered for their eccentricities. They demonstrate the ease with which it is possible to move from a wholesome, optimistic eschatology to one which is partial and pessimistic. The eschatology derived from the Bible is one which is full of hope because it is totally Christological and totally redemptive.

Chronology

Fourthly, it should be recognised that chronology is an important factor in a complete eschatology. When we have drawn attention previously to the danger of emphasising eschatological events to the exclusion of their redemptive character, it was not to suggest that chronology and the occurrence of specific events in time are to be eliminated entirely. True eschatology is chronological in character, since it is part of God's redemptive plan for mankind and since man himself is a creature of time. Furthermore, it is impossible to overlook the significance of time and chronology in either the Old or New Testaments as the following comments remind us. James Barr observes:

The Old Testament contains a complete and carefully worked out chronological system, by which a large number of the important events . . . can be dated in relation to one another, and in particular dated from the absolute datum point of the creation of the world.³⁰

The Old Testament can only be understood against its chronological background and can only be interpreted adequately in terms of time. A similar concept underlies the New Testament. Oscar Cullmann explains,

The New Testament knows only the linear time concept of Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow; all philosophical reinterpretation and dissolution into timeless metaphysics is foreign to it. It is precisely upon the basis of this rectilinear conception of time that time in primitive Christianity can yield the framework for the divine process of revelation and

29 Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: , 1956), 187

30 James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (Napierville, IL: Allenson, 1962), 28.

redemption.³¹

Cullman also argues that in later centuries New Testament eschatological expectation collapsed as a result of the Hellenisation of Christian thought. Whereas the biblical concept of time is best illustrated by a straight line, which has a beginning and an end, the Greek concept of time is more adequately expressed by a circle. The Greek spatial concept of time superseded the Hebrew linear concept in post-apostolic Christianity, simultaneously with the growth of natural immortality and continuing life after death, as opposed to the resurrection of the body at the end of time.

From the standpoint of a complete eschatology it is clear that a well-defined chronological system is of fundamental importance for understanding the Bible. Time had a beginning at creation and it therefore will have an ending, when the purposes of creation and re-creation are accomplished. Not only is God's revelation to man in Scripture contained within a chronological structure, but his principal revelation to man in Jesus Christ was similarly made within the framework of time. The 'Logos' appeared in the fullness of time, in fulfilment of Daniel's seventy weeks as predicted, and lived and worked under the Emperor Augustus, the Emperor Tiberius and under the jurisdiction of Pontius Pilate. Christ and Scripture are both God's revelation in time and can be verified chronologically. But since eschatology is also redemptive, part of the redemptive process, it follows that to have any real meaning for man it must similarly be expressed in terms of time.

It is in this context that authentic biblical theology encompasses the exposition of prophecy in general, including interpretation of Daniel and Revelation in particular. The inclusion of the books of Daniel and Revelation in the canon requires that their meaning be understood and proclaimed. Prophetic interpretation which identifies itself with the moderate, historicist school which emerged during the Reformation and to which virtually all Reformation theologians subscribed is demonstrably biblical eschatology. It was the Counter-Reformation which produced alternative interpretations of biblical apocalyptic. Understood from a Reformation perspective, the books of Daniel and Revelation still provide a chronological framework within which the redemptive purposes of God are being worked out. Biblical eschatology and the Church's proclamation which emerges from it cannot be complete without a chronological dimension and this requires a responsible, historicist interpretation of prophetic chronology.

What has been said thus far about the nature of biblical theology has been largely theoretical. This remains important if the Church is to retain an authentic identity. Self-understanding is essential to effective mission, and self-understanding is posited on a well-defined theology. Yet this in itself is not sufficient. Theology must lead to religion, theory to practice. If escha-

31 Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, 53.

tology is truly redemptive and related to the Christ-event, it cannot remain purely theological. Thus there are two further characteristics of eschatology which is genuinely biblical.

Ethics

Biblical eschatology has ethical consequences. It leads to right living both in the life of the individual and in the life of the Church. Eschatology cannot evade the implications of John's expected future, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (I John 3:2-3). This is more than mere sermonising. It is true theology and true eschatology. The inevitable consequence of a truly biblical eschatology is what has been called "eschatological living".

We must return here briefly to the doctrine of the kingdom. The concept of the kingdom of God which, as we have previously seen is essential to understanding biblical eschatology, is not a concept of two separate kingdoms. There is not one kingdom now – the kingdom of grace, and another kingdom at the end – the kingdom of glory. There is one kingdom now *and* at the end – the kingdom of grace which will become the kingdom of glory. John Bright again:

In New Testament theology the kingdom of God is not only the goal of all history and the reward of all believers . . . it is a new order which even now bursts in upon the present one and summons [believers] to be its people. Its summons demands response, and that response is obedience and righteousness here and now.³²

The Church now lives in 'kingdom' time and looks forward in hope to the fulfilment of all eschatological promise and prophecy. But it lives, during the eschatological age, in relationship to Christ. The New Testament therefore requires ethical and moral living of a high standard. It is because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church, now giving power to believers and to the proclamation of the gospel, that holiness is enjoined in view of the soon-coming of Christ. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church is the new factor. He is the eschatological gift to the Church, he is the evidence of the new and last age, and believers are called to holiness, to eschatological living, in the light of his presence and power.

The holiness, the righteous living, to which the New Testament calls believers, is not a holiness which is required because the kingdom is *to come* – it is a lifestyle which is required because the kingdom is *already here*. Sanctification is not only a doctrine which enables believers to participate in a future kingdom; it is an experience which the present kingdom enables them to share now. We can only conclude that any eschatology which does

32 Bright, *Kingdom*, 223.

not result in eschatological living is not truly biblical eschatology. Peter's exhortation, in view of the revelation of Christ at the end, is still relevant: "As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance" (I Pet. 1:13-14).

Responsibility and Mission

A further and final aspect of authentic biblical eschatology is that it engenders responsibility. The word 'responsible' has the double sense that it is causative, that it leads to action, and also that it is under obligation, that it has a duty to discharge. Both these senses come together in the relationship of eschatology to mission.

The Church has a commission to "preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15) and to do so as long as time lasts. But what is the gospel which is to be proclaimed? It is the "gospel of the kingdom" which Jesus preached (Matt. 4: 23). It is the same "gospel of the kingdom" which is to be proclaimed as a witness to all nations before the end (Matt. 24:14). In fact, the gospel which the New Testament speaks of from beginning to end is "the gospel of the kingdom". It was the arrival of the kingdom which caused the Church to embark on world mission and it is the continuing presence of the kingdom which sustains it in that task. The Church's witness is a response to the causative eschatology already in its midst. This eschatology places upon the Church a responsibility to bear witness to itself – the kingdom of God in all its richness and fulness, fulfilled and unfulfilled. It bears witness to the authority of God now revealed in Christ and now seen in the Church under the operation of the Spirit. It bears witness to the eschatological Person who has already appeared and who will appear again.

The Church, then, is already an eschatological community, bearing witness to the world, testifying to its present experience of the kingdom and proclaiming faith in its consummation. The theme which recurs in A. L. Moore's study of New Testament eschatology is that the Church's witness is seriously impaired if eschatology is absent. Indeed, he sees the loss of eschatology as the real reason for the ineffectiveness of the Church's witness throughout history. "The intense urgency with which the Church should undertake its tasks of repentance and of missionary proclamation of the gospel, is weakened if not entirely lost", he argues, by the loss or dilution of the eschatological content of faith.³³ A balanced and biblical eschatology is both the cause and content of Christian witness. A sense of responsibility which leads to mission is a major factor in the wholeness of authentic biblical eschatology.

Biblical eschatology in its wholeness results in two challenges to the Church now living in the *eschaton*. The first is to avoid identifying the

33 Moore, *Parousia*, 4.

Church with the kingdom. The Church is not the kingdom. The confusion of Church with kingdom is the result of Augustinian eschatology which replaced New Testament eschatology as Christianity moved away from its biblical basis. Neither does the Church produce the kingdom. The kingdom is already here and produces the Church. The Church, therefore, can only bear witness to the kingdom, to that which is already present and which is still to be realised in its fullness at the end. The Church must fulfil its eschatological mission, it must continually bear witness, but it must remember that the Church is preceded by the kingdom and will be succeeded by it.

The second challenge is to face honestly the implications of eschatological responsibility. Eschatology, as we have seen, is not merely part of the Church's doctrinal confession, a logical conclusion to what precedes it in a statement of faith. Eschatology shapes the content of the whole and also the content of the Church's proclamation, giving it purpose and meaning, and so places upon the Church an awesome responsibility. It must proclaim hope to a generation which lives with 'a premonition of doom', and provide answers to an age 'which cries frantically for satisfaction'. The unique wholeness of biblical eschatology can, and must be allowed to, motivate the Church living in the end of eschatological time to continuing mission. To neglect this responsibility would be to deny all that biblical eschatology is and all that it requires.