

The Dawn's Early Light: Rethinking Our Eschatology

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Introduction

Eschatology is a big word, an unfamiliar, perhaps even irrelevant, or scary word to some. But this must come to an end. I hope to begin to make it a cherished word in your vocabulary before we finish tonight. Eschatology comes from a Greek word, and it simply means a study of the End, the Last, the Final.

In our circles, this generally means talk about the End Times, the Last Days, the course of history, and various scenarios about how history ends. In this popular sense we are perhaps too familiar with, even weary of, eschatology. It conjures debates, legitimate in their place, about whether one is premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial – about tribulations and raptures and the like. All of this tends to relegate Eschatology to something exclusively concerned with the END of human history.

It also has the effect of segregating eschatology from other areas of Christian theology. Pick up any theological textbook, any book on Systematic Theology, and you will find eschatology discussed as a standalone subject, usually at the end of the book.

All of this, I want to contend, is a mistake, or at least an imbalance. For what it obscures is the fact that eschatology is foundational. It is not a special isolated subject, it is pervasive in Scripture, and it forms part the deep architectural structure of Christian theology. And grasping this is decisive if we are to live, think, and act as Christians. If you can imagine a glass of water representing Christian doctrine, eschatology is not like a lemon on the glass. It is a dye shot into the glass. It pervades and colors the whole.

The Basic Structure

Old Testament Expectation and fulfillment.

Jesus' appearing announces that the kingdom of God is at hand. By this he declares that he is the fulfillment of the whole Old Testament expectation of the coming Day of the Lord. The Old Testament sets forth a unified and fully orbbed hope, that in the latter days (as Isaiah 2, and Micah 4 put it), the Messianic

kingdom, an age of peace would arrive. This would entail the restoration of Israel, glory for Zion, the subjugation of her enemies, the gathering in of the Gentiles and, ultimately, as Isaiah 65 says, a new heavens and a new earth.

Jesus declares that this kingdom has come. It comes in his person, his preaching, his signs and wonders, his conflict with and defeat of Satan and the powers of darkness. But in his first Advent (first coming) it comes provisionally - the world continues on – and the kingdom shall come in fullness at the consummation of history in his second advent (coming).

This period, then, the whole period between the first and second comings of Christ, is the last days, latter days, last time, spoken of in Old Testament. Hebrews 1:2, James 5, 1 Timothy 4, 2 Timothy 3, Acts 2 (citing Joel), 1 Peter 1:20, all speak of the fact that the New Testament church, then and now, is living in the last days.

In slightly different language, 1 Corinthians 10:11, and Hebrews 9:26, teach that the end of the ages has come upon us. The Messianic age has dawned, but it has not yet been brought to full completion. As such this is a time of tension, of expectation, and of joyful, partially realized, but still future, hope.

The Already – Not Yet

We speak then of the already-not yet: The Kingdom is already here, but not yet in fullness. This already-not yet tension is the defining reality of our existence. It shapes everything. But we must say more. We must explore the already-not yet, by exploring the relation between the first and second Advents (comings) of Christ.

Too much Christian thinking is done with a purely vertical conception of God's relation to us. God is not in our SPACE (true), he is in heaven. He came down in Christ, comes down via Spirit, will come down more gloriously later. Tendency: purely vertical. Eschatological thinking, biblical thinking, is also profoundly horizontal. God is not only outside of our space, he is outside of our time. When he comes to us he not only invades our space, he invades our time from the age to come, the future. Let's tease this out.

The two comings of Christ, the two phases of the kingdom's realization, do not reduce simply to: "we get some now, and we get some (more) later," as if we were dealing with two separate, unrelated stages. We often think of the first coming and second coming as pure linear sequence, one then two. Like we get the first pizza delivered on Tuesday and the second pizza will come on Friday. But this will not do, and it distorts the power of what has come in Jesus Christ. Rather, we should think of one advent with two poles, two comings which are locked together, which entail each other.

Put plainly, the kingdom to be consummated in second coming, has itself arrived in first coming. One is not just before two, but IS two in advance, the actual beginning of two's appearance. Tuesday's pizza is, in some basic and powerful sense, a participation in, and early arrival of, Friday's pizza.

This means: The coming End of all things, the age to come, has broken into our time – the time which Paul calls this present evil age. What is to occur fully later has appeared, begun, commenced in Jesus Christ. The future has broken into the present. The age to come has invaded this age. Jesus' appearing is an intrusion into this age of the next age. As the writer of the book of Hebrews puts it, those who have tasted of Holy Spirit, have tasted powers of age to come.

The coming of Jesus, then, is the "Dawn's Early Light." And the Dawn's early light is not simply a pointer, a sign, or a precursor of the dawn, it is the Dawn's very light. He is the light of the End, the coming Eternal Day breaking forth into the darkness. Romans 13:12: The night is far gone, the Day (coming eschatological, final Day) is at hand. First John 2:8 the darkness is passing away the true light is already shining. This means: Every day is one of the last days, all time is end time. This doesn't mean all days are the same, but all days are charged with the presence and coming of the kingdom. All days are days when the Lord is at hand, and the final end is, theologically speaking, near. It is near since the End has begun in Christ. And since our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed, John can even say this is the last hour (1 John 2:18).

The Overlap of the Ages

Thus, another way of expressing this already-not yet tension is to say we live in the overlap of the ages. That is, we live out our lives in the linear sequence of this fallen age. We plan, we mark our days, months and years according to the time of this age. But this time, this current age, is fading time, passing time, judged time. It is not the decisive time for Christians and the church. Think of how radical, how wrenching, how disturbing, and yet liberating, that statement is. Calendar time is not decisive for us. We live in it to be sure, but we live in it as those who partake of Christ, through the Spirit, and thus as people who belong to, and are to be shaped and determined by, the age to come. We are (or we are supposed to be), all the down, eschatological people, people of the End, the NEW humanity, the harbinger, sign, and foretaste of the future.

Implications

Look at a number of issues briefly (remember the dye in the water – everything is affected).

I. Atonement

John the Baptist comes and declares that the long awaited Day of the Lord is at hand. John asks those coming to be baptized "Who warned you to flee from the wrath which is to come?" He says the "ax is already laid to the root of the tree and every tree which does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." Jesus is then said to be ready with his winnowing fan to clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but also to burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

John clearly sees the coming of the kingdom in Jesus as a coming judgment. Salvation is ALWAYS through judgment. And in submitting to John's baptism, Jesus stands with the guilty and asks that the coming judgments be placed on him. When Jesus ushers in the Kingdom of God he is bringing the final judgment of the last day forward into history. He is not simply dying for your sins; he is dying for your sins by bringing the sanctions of the Last Day forward and bearing them on his own head. This changes the way we look at the cross itself. This is why the book of Hebrews can say he appeared at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin, and shall appear a second time NOT Testament TO BEAR SIN, but to bring salvation to his people. The coming wrath they deserved has already been poured out at the cross.

The flaming sword of judgment which guarded the way back to Eden, the purging of the land by the holy wars of Joshua, pointed to the final judgment which Christ has borne for his people so that we might inherit the restored Eden, the New Canaan, the New Creation. The wrath and curse of the final judgment for us has occurred in Jesus Christ. The Atonement is an eschatological act.

II. Resurrection

Jesus' resurrection moves him fully into the new creation. He was crucified in weakness, raised in immortal glory. He IS the resurrection and the life. It is to this glorified Christ that we are united. And if we are united to him in the likeness of his death, so we shall be in the likeness of his resurrection. His resurrection, then, guarantees your resurrection. Yet it does more than that. For when Scripture calls the risen Christ the first-fruits, it is not simply saying that a harvest is to come. The appearance of first-fruits means the final harvest has already begun. For as by a man (first Adam) came death, by a man (last Adam) has come also the resurrection of the dead. The general resurrection of the dead has started in Jesus Christ. Thus, we can't think of his resurrection without including ours in it.

III. The Ministry of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit is the power of the age to come. He unites us to Christ and thus we are already, provisionally, raised with him and seated with him. Our very lives are hidden in Him who exists outside of our space and time, and shall only be revealed when He returns in glory. To be regenerated (born again) by the Spirit is

to partake of the final regeneration of all things (Matthew 19:28) at the end of the age. Thus, to be in Christ, through the Spirit, is, as 2 Corinthians 5 puts it, to be, already, in the new creation.

The Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance precisely because he is the foretaste, the down payment of that inheritance. He is our inheritance in advance, for the Spirit makes the eschatological, glorified Christ present to us. And Paul can say that, having just the first-fruits of Spirit, we groan to be clothed in embodied immortality. Are we groaning in the Spirit for the coming resurrection? The whole creation is groaning and we are to be groaning with it. The whole (not a part) of the Christian life, life in the Spirit, is life lived out of eschatological power in hopeful groaning for the resurrection. You were born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

IV. Church (General)

The church is the future, new humanity in advance. She is already raised, seated, and gathered around the enthroned Christ in the heavenly places. We have already come, the writer to the Hebrews says, to the heavenly Zion, to myriads of angels, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect. The church lives and worships, Paul tells us, not from Mt. Sinai in Arabia, or the earthly Jerusalem. She is the Jerusalem from above, who is our mother. She is the historical manifestation of the Jerusalem that will descend in splendor at the end of the age (Revelation 21-22). The church lives in, and from, the future which has come in Christ. She cannot be defined along the axis of this present age. She is, at every point, in every action, an eschatological people.

V. The Church's Life and Worship

The church's life and worship, then, take place in this already-not yet tension. She bears witness to, and announces, the kingdom which has come; she is illumined by the dawn's early light. Her whole moral life is to be shaped by the purity and splendor of this light. How could it be otherwise? For the church is united to the RISEN CHRIST who lives in the glory of the age to come.

We are not united to the baby Jesus, or to the historical Jesus, but to the eschatological risen Jesus. Thus, when we read the gospels, or the history of Israel in the Old Testament, we are never in the position of the original hearers. We are, at every point, united to the RISEN ONE. The Jesus of the coming age, the risen, glorified, Jesus, is never one fact or facet of the Christian life. Everything in the Christian life is ABSOLUTELY determined by the resurrection of Christ.

Everything we are called to do requires his eschatological life. Even our bearing of the cross, our suffering and dying in weakness, are determined by the power of the aged to come embodied in the Risen One. This is why Paul can say, in

Philippians 3, that he wants to know Christ in the power of his resurrection, so that he can participate in his sufferings and be conformed to his death. Resurrection power in the Christian life is conformity to Christ's death. We need at every point an eschatological renewal of mind and will. And living out of the resurrection Paul says, at that same place in Philippians 3, that he hopes to attain to the resurrection of the dead.

So, as the beginning of the new creation, the church points to, and yearns for, and lives in accordance with, the End which has come in Christ. Christian ethics is, all the way down, eschatological ethics: Ethics of the kingdom and not of the fading world. In her preaching she announces no gospel but this eschatological gospel. Through her ministers the risen Christ, speaks as THE prophet, and He speaks the word of this kingdom. He calls us, and all men, to repent and flee to Him, for He has borne the eschatological judgment – and he warns that those who refuse will face the eschatological sanctions, the wrath of the Lamb. He equips the saints to live as worthy of their heavenly calling, as people of the Day.

In the holy Supper, the church enacts this whole drama of the kingdom which has come and is coming. The supper vividly, in the bread and wine, reminds us that the kingdom has come, that the coming cup of wrath has been drained for us by Christ. And at the same time, the Supper is a foretaste of coming Wedding Feast of Lamb. Not simply a pointer, but a foretaste, the ante-chamber, the hors d'oeuvres of the coming feast. As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

The church's prayers are framed by the concerns of the Lord's Prayer. We are to pray then, for the name of God to be hallowed, and thus for all blasphemous and vain usage of that name to be silenced. We are to pray for kingdom to come in fullness, and thus for the kingdom of darkness to be shattered. Thus we are to pray for the destruction of death, the vindication of the martyrs, who themselves, under the heavenly altar, pray for the avenging of their blood in the earth. We are to pray for the restoration of the whole creation, for the summing up, the reintegration of all things in Christ, for that and nothing less is the eternal purpose of God. All prayer is shaped by the End. Praying for the resurrection of the dead is to be at the top of your daily to-do list.

Conclusion

Grasping this basic structure of biblical eschatology has, as I hope we've already seen, one enormous, practical goal. That is to turn us toward, and orient us to, the End, the End which has already come upon us in Christ. This will be a wrenching experience for we are far too much creatures of this age. This involves tearing, uprooting, and displacement of our mind, will and affections.

The Christian life is not simply a new worldview, or a new set of principles to navigate this age with. It is not merely a new life, or a purely future hope which guarantees that you will go to heaven. The Christian life is about a new time. It is the invasion of this time by the time of the End. Its power is the power of the resurrection, the power of the age to come. And all of it, every last bit of it, is ordered to this End coming in fullness. Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 1 that we have turned from idols to serve the living and true God. And having done this, he continues, we are to WAIT for his Son FROM heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from wrath to come. The whole Christian life is nothing but a WAITING, an active, joyful, hope infused, waiting for the risen Christ to deliver us from the wrath to come.

Let me close by indicating how being gripped by this eschatological outlook will change the shape of Christian desire. Primarily what this does for us is relativize everything, and I mean everything, in light of the end. To see this is to cease giving anything like absolute value to anything but the God who was, and who is, and who IS to come. This God, and His indestructible kingdom, which, in Christ, has come and is coming, this dawn's early light, allows us to see all other things, including especially, fair and lovely things, in proper perspective.

Eschatological people do not mistake their politics for the kingdom of God. They do not idolatrously worship their nation, their jobs, their spouses, their children, their ministries, their legacy. They do not confuse their dreams with seeking first the kingdom of God. They know that men die, worlds and empires lapse, but the Lord liveth. Their heart is where their treasure is, and their treasure is in the risen Christ and his unshakeable kingdom. They know they are strangers and aliens, a pilgrim people, who have no lasting city here, and who are looking, like Abraham, for the coming city, the new Jerusalem, which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Amen.

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