

Introduction¹

The Modern Eschatological Gap and How We Got Here

Amid the mass of theological literature that is turned out year by year, it would seem unlikely that there should be a serious gap in any subject, let alone one that is central to the body of belief. Yet on the doctrine of the last things such a gap, in English at any rate, does appear to exist. There are many works treating the subject both exhaustively and controversially, which were written before the revolution in criticism reached this area of the field (and it reached it remarkably late). But these books, though not valueless, are now quite inadequate to create or sustain a faith which takes into account the verdicts of modern science alike in the theological field and outside it. This applies equally to current productions of a fundamentalist nature, of which there are still some within traditional Christianity and many more on the heretic fringe.

The popularity of various forms of adventism outside the orthodox Christian bodies is a clear reflection of the failure of the church to formulate a theology of the last things which is intellectually respectable. A corresponding theology of the first things was hammered out under much stress during the second half of the last century and is today more or less accepted doctrine. Consequently, the sects here find little scope. But in the eschatological field they swarm and multiply; and even within the church there is an alarming confusion. A Gallup poll in an ordinary congregation, or even in a theological college, on “What

1. [This Introduction was omitted from the 1968 revision of the book, although parts of it were relocated in chapter 4 of that edition. See ch. 2 n.24.]

do you really believe about the second advent?" would be an interesting and probably a shattering experiment.

Two Exceptions

NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP

There are, of course, two notable exceptions to this absence of modern thought on the subject of eschatology. The first is the vast amount of work done on it from the point of view of biblical, and particularly New Testament, scholarship. One has only to mention the names of Schweitzer and Dodd to recall the way in which the eschatological approach has dominated and revolutionized the modern understanding of the gospel. Yet all these writers have, naturally, been working within, rather than criticizing, the categories and thought-forms of the apostolic age. How far the axioms of the biblical writers on these matters are from those of the secular mind of the twentieth century will be considered in chapter 1. But there is an equally serious difficulty for modern Christian doctrine. For these assumptions are also strangely at variance with the interests that have concentrated attention on the only other department in which eschatological thought has recently shown signs of vigor.

LIFE AFTER DEATH

This department is that which treats of the hopes and prospects of the individual after death. Here there are many books, and one or two of them supremely good. But their very number indicates a shift of interest to a position in which the eschatological perspective of the New Testament becomes largely irrelevant. The interest of the modern man in Christian eschatology, if he has any interest at all, centers in the fact and moment of death. He wants to know whether he will survive it and in what form; he wants to know what he is to expect on "the other side," what heaven will be like, whether there is such a thing as hell, and so on.

The Eschatological Emphasis of the New Testament

In the New Testament, on the other hand, the point round which hope and interest revolve is not the moment of death, but the day of the *parousia*, or appearance of Christ in the glory of his kingdom. Moreover, in the main stream of the New Testament tradition this is, first and foremost, a hope not for the dead, but for the living. The doctrine of the resurrection is formulated by St. Paul almost as an afterthought to meet the problem raised by that *minority* of Christians who had already died prior to the *parousia*. Indeed, the resurrection hope is one of those subjects which gains even the limited space accorded it in the New Testament writings because it had not had a central place in the original preaching and had since become a matter of controversy. But even as, with the passage of time, the spiritual majority within the church began to pass from the living to the dead, the centre of interest and expectation continued right through the New Testament period, to be focused upon the day of the Son of Man and the triumph of his kingdom in a renovated earth. It was the return of the Lord Jesus with all his saints that engaged the thoughts and prayers of Christians, not their own prospects beyond the grave. The hope was social and it was historical.

The Shift: How We Got Where We Are

As a result of the assimilation of this message to a Hellenic culture that had an uneschatological view of history and an individualistic doctrine of the soul, there began the shift of emphasis which has produced the modern outlook. Whereas in primitive Christian thinking the moment of the individual's decease was entirely subordinated to the great day of the Lord and the final judgment, in later thought it is the hour of death which becomes decisive. It is *that* after which no repentance is possible, it is *that* which decides the destination of the soul, and it is *that* which supersedes the consummation of history as the main object of the believer's concern. The traditional "four last things" which stand at the end of the individual's life (death, judgment, heaven and hell) take the place of the great last thing, or *eschaton*, which closes everything.

In this context most of the eschatological scheme of the New Testament becomes irrelevant. Consequently, it has been silently

dropped from recent doctrinal discussion. Most of the books are content to debate the issue of immortality in complete isolation from it. Others are sufficiently tied to the Bible to allocate a single chapter to the second coming;² but it has ceased any longer to control the whole. There has been a progressive detachment of all Christian doctrine, including that of the last things, from its original eschatological framework.

Such, then, is our paradoxical situation. On the one hand, we have the biblical scholars insisting from every side that the apostolic gospel means nothing unless it is seen as eschatological from beginning to end. On the other hand, we have a modern Christianity whose whole idea of what is meant by eschatology, and whose interest in it, is utterly diverse from that of the New Testament.

The Need for a New Eschatological Discussion for the Modern World

This situation would perhaps be more comic than tragic, were it not for two other factors. The first is that the church has to preach this—its eschatological gospel—in a world to which the Christian picture of the last things has become practically meaningless. And the second is that there are signs within the church, particularly where it has been tested in the fire of judgment, of a revival which is everywhere connected with a new and living sense of eschatological expectancy.

What these two facts mean will be the subject of the first and last chapters of this book. But if the church is to meet this hour either towards the outside world, in its apologetics and evangelism, or in liberating the forces of renewal within its own life, it cannot postpone any longer its responsibility to think out theologically what it does and can believe in a scientific age about the last things.

This present book is offered simply to provoke the kind of thing that is required. It does not claim to represent deep research or to present a definitive solution. It is put out as the first stage of a discussion—a discussion that is inevitably going to be forced upon the church. For in this matter of eschatology the tide has undoubtedly turned. There

2. E.g., Mackintosh, *Immortality and the Future*; Leckie, *The World to Come and Final Destiny*.

is a popular demand with which the theologians have yet to catch up.³ On the Continent the theological recovery is much further advanced. We have nothing to correspond with Althaus' great book, *Die letzten Dinge*, and since then the discussion has been carried further by many writers. Recently it has been taken up again, with particular reference to the Christian doctrine of time, by K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/2⁴ (summarized by Dr. F. W. Camfield in *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, June, 1950⁵) and O. Cullmann, *Christ et le Temps*.⁶

In English, Dr. E. Lampert's latest book, *The Apocalypse of History*, is a notable contribution; but apart from that one can virtually say that this century has seen no serious work on eschatology (immortality always excluded) from a doctrinal point of view, except from fundamentalist quarters (Roman, Protestant, or heretical). The vast amount of study that has been given to it within the field of New Testament scholarship is conveniently summarized to date in H. A. Guy's *New Testament Doctrine of the "Last Things."* (H. H. Rowley's *The Relevance of Apocalyptic* provides a useful bibliography) From a definitely doctrinal point of view, the following books deal with the subject suggestively, though briefly, in the course of more general discussion: O. C. Quick, *The Doctrines of the Creed; The Gospel of the New World*; R. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Vol. II); *Faith and History*; C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel*; A. Richardson, *Christian Apologetics*.

My indebtedness to many of these will become clear in the course of the argument. I wish also to thank Dr. T. F. Torrance for kindly reading the whole in manuscript and suggesting valuable criticisms; the editors of *The Scottish Journal of Theology* for permission to reprint matter occurring in chapters 8 and 9; and, finally, my wife, who has helped this book at every stage of its production.

3. It must be many a day since a series of popular Bible commentaries put the book of the Revelation second only to St. Mark in order of publication. I refer to the recent edition by R. H. Preston and A. T. Hanson in the SCM Torch Series. Dr. Max Warren's *The Truth of Vision* shows how a recovered eschatological perspective is affecting the whole missionary outlook. Many other instances could be given.

4. [Published in English as Barth, *Church Dogmatics*.]

5. [Camfield. "Man in His Time."]

6. [Published in English as Cullmann. *Christ and Time*.]