COMMON GRACE AND ESCHATOLOGY*

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Introduction

Eschatology has to a great extent been ignored in the latter part of this century by mainstream evangelicals in Scotland. There are a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, during the 20th century Reformed evangelicals have felt themselves caught between two opposing extremes when thinking of eschatology. There is the upper millstone of the revival of interest in eschatology as an important theme in theology generally. Continental theologians have taken this subject from the dusty cupboard of discarded theories and invested it with the greatest significance. This is perhaps best exemplified in Barth's oft quoted statement: 'If Christianity be not altogether thoroughgoing eschatology, there remains in it no relationship whatever with Christ.[1]

However the men who have been involved in this revival of interest have been held at arms length by Scottish evangelicals for reasons other than their eschatology. Whilst endorsing the reawakened interest in Reformed theology we have been deeply suspicious of some of the forms which it has taken. As a result we have by and large tended to avoid involvement in such debate and have continued to plough our own furrow. With the strengthening of evangelical theology in Scotland we are thankfully beginning to recover confidence and are prepared to contribute to ongoing debate and to welcome insights from other theological streams.

Then there is the nether millstone of the fundamentalist concentration on differing interpretations of the *Revelation of John* and other apocalyptic passages of Scripture which has led to so much millenarian fortune–telling and numerical sleight of hand, especially in the U.S.A. Such supposedly theological activity is essentially alien to Scottish evangelical though. Given the incompatibility of the two main centres of eschatological involvement, it is hardly surprising that evangelicals in Britain and especially Scotland have by

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1 K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, London, 6th ed., reprint 1975, p. 314.

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and large kept their heads down and tried to ignore the noises from the trenches on either side.

There is however another and more fundamental reason for our lack of involvement in eschatological debate which is caused by the very nature of the subject itself and the way it must be approached. Our methods of study, the categories we use and the thought processes involved are determined by the object of study. It is my contention that in Scottish evangelical theology we tend to bring to the study of eschatology ways of thought which are not fully compatible with the subject and as a consequence we fail to appreciate the significance of eschatology and of its relationships with other doctrines.

Like conservatives in every field evangelicals exhibit a tendency to approach any subject expecting to find clearly defined pathways to resolved conclusions; in our theology this is seen in our general adherence to various forms of federal Calvinism. There is an emphasis on system in our theology sadly lacking elsewhere in the U.K. Unfortunately however our emphasis on system has too often degenerated into a systematisation of the doctrines of the Church rather than having developed as an attempt to open up in coherent fashion the interrelationships within the content of revelation. As Otto Weber warns us; 'We must also bear in mind that every comprehensive system, by virtue of the "power of the system", can close our ears very easily to the Word which we are supposed to hear continually.'[2]

The price which we sometimes pay for this misplaced emphasis is the loss of appreciation of the tensions within revelation. Instead of attempting to iron out all the logical difficulties and tension which confront us we should heed Cornelius Van Til when he tells us that for the theologian:

> To be faithful to the system of truth as found in Scripture one must not take one doctrine and deduce from it by means of syllogistic procedure what he thinks follows from it. One must gather together all the facts and all the teaching of Scripture and organise then as best he can, always mindful of the fact that such ordering is the ordering of the revelation of God, who is never fully comprehensible to man.[3]

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2 O. Webber, *Foundations of Dogmatics,* Grand Rapids, 1981, Vol. 1, p. 307.

3 C. Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge,* Grand Rapids, 1969, p. 38.

Eschatological Perspective

The Bible makes no pretence of providing us with some all-encompassing historico-theological scheme by which we are able to logically apportion each and every event its place within the temporal and supra-temporal outworking of the divine decrees. Throughout Scriptural revelation we are confronted by significant tensions, tensions which are never more clearly evident than when we consider eschatology. In exploring this area of revelation we are forced to confront the gap between that which we know we are and have in Christ and that which we know in our fallen existence. Calvin makes the following comments with regard to what is already reality in Christ:

> In the cross of Christ, as in a splendid theatre, the incomparable goodness of God is set before the whole world. The glory of God shines, indeed, in all creatures on high and below, but never more brightly than in the cross, in which there was a wonderful change of things *(admirabilis rerum conversio)* - the condemnation of all men was manifested, sin blotted out, salvation restored to men; in short, the whole world was renewed and all things restored to order.[4]

Thus all is already completed in Christ, in that crucial point of history all has been renewed and restored, the eschatological pivotal point has already occurred.

> For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col.1:19,20)

At that moment all that was necessary was completed in the cry 'It is finished.' However we still await the visible renewal and restoration of all things. Until then we live with the tension between the goal already achieved in the cross and the destiny yet to be achieved on his return to inaugurate the perfected kingdom already complete in Christ. We who remain to live out our lives in the midst of this tension can find meaning within the historical only by reference to that which has already occurred in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There can be no history independent of him.

This existential tension is implicit in the teaching of Christ that the Kingdom of God is both present and future. The chief characteristic of eschatological thought is the underlying tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet.' This we know in our own experience: although we are justified and right with God at this moment we still live as saints and as sinners, none of us are

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4 J. Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 13:21.

consistently Christian. The new life in Christ is a present reality in the life of the believer (II Cor.4:10,11) but that new life is provisional and imperfect within our experience and is yet to be revealed (Rom.8:19; Col.3:3.) Our imputed righteousness is truly real, but not yet realized. We now see through a mirror dimly and await the day when we see face to face, our wrestling is with that which is both revealed and hidden. John expresses the tension between the now and the not yet thus:

> Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is (I John 3:2).

A genuine biblical eschatological vision accepts this tension and sees eschatology and history as one. Eschatology is not purely a concern with the end times or the final moments of history. Rather it is a concern with the dynamic of human existence and development, with that continuing cosmic rule of God involving both the judgement and the renewal of our human life within the created structures. Eschatology is concerned with that sovereign work of God which gives meaning and destiny to our history and which is moving, to his ends, at the very centre of human history here and now.

Jesus' radicalising of the Mosaic law results from this eschatological perspective.[5] In the Sermon on the Mount he commands us as though we had newly come from God's hand into a creation which did not know the fall, and he refuses to listen to our excuse that 'reality' is not like that. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus refuses to allow the fallen and distorted forms of this present age a decisive role in our decision making. Rather the Kingdom of God breaks in with its uncompromising demands that in *our* world we live in the midst of the tension between the claims of our age and those of the age to come as God recreates in the establishment of his Kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount does not contain mere rhetorical declamations designed to spur us on to yet greater efforts to attain purity in our worldly existence. Rather it is a crushing indictment of our secularity within this present age.

Already amongst the redeemed Jesus takes a standpoint which enables us to clearly see our condition in the light of the Kingdom which is here and is yet to come. The absolute demands of the Beatitudes find their dynamic in the hope they minister to us as our gaze is drawn from the far country in which we live and is directed homewards as we long for the completion of that which has already begun.

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5 H. Thielike, *The Evangelical Faith,* Grand Rapids.

The failure to accept, welcome and explore the tension inherent in any doctrine and particularly within the field of eschatology has led to a diminution of our theology generally and especially when we approach the subject of common grace. If we are to discern the dynamic of human existence and progress within history we must search for that which encompasses the judgement and renewal of all of human life and history.

Murray on Common Grace

However in Scotland, as elsewhere, in our determination to harmonise tensions within the received doctrines of the Church we have seen common grace as the solution to a particular problem within our formulations. By stressing total depravity and the sovereignty of God in election we posit an absolute spiritual dichotomy between the elect and the reprobate; and yet the good works of the reprobate cannot be denied; that they produce works of mercy and understanding, artifacts of beauty and wonder and also prosper in their business ventures is plainly seen. More, it is evident that God is good to the reprobate, enabling them to perform such works even in the midst of their rebellion against him. The reprobate, in common with the elect, also receive gifts and favour from God; the sun and rain of Matt. 5:45, which although not given indiscriminately, are effective in the lives of the righteous and unrighteous alike. The generally accepted solution to this difficulty is that God has a particular enabling but non-saving grace which he extends to all of creation, including those who are unregenerate. Thus it is by God's grace that the reprobate can bring forth good within God's creation and receive good gifts from God despite their rebellion against him. In this way the reprobate who are at enmity with God and dead in sin can nevertheless do relative good and assist progress within the flow of history without necessitating a revision of the doctrine of total depravity.

Utilising common grace as a possible solution to a problem in harmonising doctrines leads to a distortion of the whole question of the relation of unbelievers to God and the progress of history towards its end. That such an approach even hinders us in investigating the question of common grace is clearly seen in the work of Scottish theologian John Murray. Murray[6] begins by asking the common grace question in the form usually employed by Reformed theologians of the Princeton school. ' How is it that this sin-cursed world enjoys so much favour and kindness at the hand of

6 J. Murray, *Collected Works,* Vol. II, Edinburgh. 1977, pp.93-113

its holy and ever-blessed Creator?[7] This formulation sees the question of common grace as a one-sided problem focusing on the manner by which the 'heirs of hell enjoy so many good gifts at the hand of God'.[8] Murray's particular field of reference, common to English-speaking federal theologians,[9] causes him to focus on only one aspect of the common grace question, thus laying down a restricted field of enquiry which determines the conclusions to be reached before the journey begins. Murray fails to reckon with the considerable cultural, epistemological and eschatological implications of such a generalised operation of grace.

The methodological weakness of this approach is that it treats the common grace question as though there is an absolute, observable divergence between the elect and the reprobate already existing in time. However whilst salvation is eternal and absolute, within created time we experience grace as fallen creatures unable to receive the coherence and fullness of meaning. We work out our salvation with fear and trembling, groping individually towards that divergence which exists in supra-historical time and which shall be ours on the Last Day. The antithesis is not as clearly discernible as Augustine would have us believe, neither is it as clear as Kuyper wished to emphasize with the establishment of Christian political and cultural organisations in the Netherlands. Such activity leads socially and politically to the too easy identification of the causes of Christians with God's cause. The eschatological salvific divergence between regenerate and unregenerate is not the only factor that comes into play when discussing commonality or otherwise in man's relationship to God. Whilst there is radical epistemic divergence there remains ontological and metaphysical commonality between regenerate and unregenerate. Throughout his discussion Murray ignores this and operates as though the *eschaton* had already occurred, time was at an end, and the ultimate differentiation between elect and reprobate had already been finalised in actuality.

This approach has been utilised since Augustine at least. In *De Civitate Dei* Augustine interprets the antithesis brought about by regeneration by the Holy Spirit as pertaining to identifiable groups or communities within humanity.[10] He concretises these in history as

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7 *Ibid., p. 93.*

8 Ibid., p. 93.

9 C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology,* Vol 2, pp. 654-675;
L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology,* pp. 432-446;
A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image,* Grand Rapids, 1986, pp. 189-202.

10 Augustine, *De Civitate Dei,* 15:1.

for example placing the Assyrian and Roman empires[11] on the one side, Israel[12] and the Church[13] on the other. However in the outworking of history black and white exist only in principle. New Testament thought patterns and naive experience suggest that there is ever an area of mystery with regard to groups and individuals. The unfolding of the history of the world towards the eschaton is the working out of the tensions of the antithesis. However the antithesis does not show itself in the clearly discernible manner indicated by Augustine and others.

The first area of operation of common grace acknowledged by Murray is that of restraint; restraint of man's sin, restraint of God's wrath, restraint of evil. Whilst there is adequate biblical evidence to allow us to speak of the restraint of that which mars creation and God's judgment of it, if we accept Murray's position we are led to the conclusion that without this restraint of common grace sin would run its full course and there would be chaos or annihilation. However, is the restraint of sin whilst we await the Second Coming to be understood only within a framework of common grace? By failing to explore the possibility of other understandings of restraint as stemming from the creational structures themselves Murray verges on creating a situation in which we must understand the creation as existing, not just with an autonomous motivating principle, that is sinful rebellion, but also with an autonomous ontological principle, that it exists independently of God except where He actively intervenes with saving grace or common grace. Such cosmological dualism opens the door to Gnosticism.

As well as the negative or preventative activity of supposed common grace Murray also discerns a positive aspect in the bestowal of good upon and within creation considered as a whole and upon individuals as part of that undifferentiated whole. Murray splits this into several areas.

i) Creation itself is the recipient of divine bounty.
ii) The unregenerate are recipients of divine favour. The house of Potiphar was blessed for Joseph's sake; idol worshippers have a witness of God's presence and goodness in the rain from heaven and the fruitful seasons (Acts 14:16,17).
iii) The unregenerate perform good actions as a result of the moral law written in their hearts.

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11 *Ibid.*, 18:2.
12 *Ibid.*, 18:47.
13 *Ibid.*, 20:9.

iv) The unregenerate receive goodness through the administration of the gospel although they may not be saved by it.
v) Civil government is instituted for the purpose of restraining evil and promoting good in the body politic .
It is to be noted that there are other and clearly applicable sources of these goods. Those goods which Murray sees as a result of common grace are either inherently part of the structures of creation (i, iii and v).in which case we are more accurate if we attribute these undoubted influences of God to common law rather than common grace; or they are the product of saving grace and God's care of his Church overflowing to the temporal benefit of unbelievers,ii and iv.

The blessing received by unbelievers as a result of the activity of believers ii are more easily explained by the working of special grace in the lives of believers than of supposedly common grace in the lives of unbelievers. Concerning group iv Murray writes: 'The administration of the gospel results in the experience of the power and glory of the gospel.'[14] This is true, but rejection of that power and glory leads to the eternal condemnation of the unbeliever. Along with Scots theologians of an earlier age such as Durham, Gillespie and Rutherfurd[15] we question whether it is a blessing to men who yet reject the Son of God, that they have purifying influences of Christianity. The preaching of the gospel is a savour of life to the saved and a savour of death to the unsaved. Although upholding the usual federal understanding of common graces, at this point Charles Hodge is more consistent:

> So the gospel and its ministers are the causes of life to some, and the death to others, and to all they are either the one or the other. The word of God is quick and powerful either to save or to destroy. It cannot be neutral. If it does not save, it destroys.[16]

Is it realistic to describe as grace that which destroys and leads to increased condemnation for the unbeliever? If we continue to term such action *grace* then we must reassess the whole question of the relationship of God to fallen humanity.

Similarly with the implications of common grace for our understanding of the general culture of the nations. If we hold that the artistic abilities of men and women are gifts of God's common grace as understood in the federal *schema* we would have to recognise the God–denying work of men and women in rebellion against God as being inspired by or founded upon grace. Thus the works which lead to the condemnation of these children made in the image of God are

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14 J. Murray, *ibid.*

15 J. Walker, *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland,* Edinburgh ,1982.

16 C. Hodge, *Commentary on I Corinthians,* 2:1.

supposedly examples of God's graciousness. How gracious is a 'grace' which leads to eternal condemnation?

Commonality

Commonness does exist as part of our being and creaturely existence. There is an historical correlativity of the universal and the particular. The gospel offer comes to the generality, to sinners differentiated in the mind of God as elect or reprobate, but prior to their acceptance or rejection regarded as part of the undifferentiated historic generality. Within history there is genuine variation in the relation of individuals to God because God's unvarying counsel lies behind history; but also, for the same reason, there is genuine significance in the measure of generality through which God leads each group to its particular destiny at the Last Day.

We cannot properly investigate the question of common grace if we persist in thinking in terms of clearly delineated absolutes and doing our theology as though we operated at present with a differentiation which will be clear only in supra-historical time, complete only at the *eschaton.* We do not do theology in a laboratory, it is the activity of the Church, the body of Christ present in the midst of fallen creation. All are either elect or reprobate and the differentiation will be apparent on the Last Day. However we live in the between times. Creation was good, very good, and man willfully destroyed that harmony; in a response purely of grace God sent his only begotten Son to be our Saviour, to reclaim man and creation by making atonement in his blood. We live within that work, in the times between his first and second coming, wrestling with the tensions inevitable for saints living in a fallen creation.

All humans, whether covenant–keeping or covenant–breaking, live and move and have their being commonly, and this raises basic questions with regard to our epistemology and to our understanding of creation. In what manner do believer and unbeliever have the 'facts' in common? Does common grace create a neutral domain in which believer and unbeliever can labour side by side to God's glory? We can approach this in several ways. Firstly we can proceed as from a neutral area of naive knowledge available to natural and regenerate man alike, from which can be constructed a common area of fact before the antithesis distorts understanding. Secondly we can conceive of the unity of knowledge as being based upon a shared rationality by which all men can interpret the facts of the environment correctly, up to a point. Both these approaches, whilst maintaining the antithesis, indicate an area of identity without differentiation, an area of commonness without qualification. There is another approach however; that which proceeds on the basis of all

facts, the environment and man's own constitution as a rational and moral being, as being revelational of God and thus all men unavoidably know God, and know themselves as God's creatures, no matter how they may try to suppress this knowledge.

The structures for creation within which the children of God continue to live remain valid despite the fall. The fundamental conditioning laws which make possible the existence of things, events, social structures etc., remain in force. These laws are the structuring framework outside of which it is inconceivable that anything could exist. The rebel against God can never totally deny God; he cannot flee from reason into unreason, from logos into chaos; he cannot release himself from the law of gravity; if he is cut he still bleeds. The structural laws forming creation remain, what has changed due to the entrance of sin is the reaction of humans to God, the way we encounter, develop and utilize the structures for creation; this has resulted in the alienation of creation itself from God. (Gen 3:17, 18.)

Christless Grace?

English-speaking federal Calvinism's greatest failing with common grace and one which distorts its entire concept of the doctrine, is that in its exposition this has become a grace divorced from Christ, a restraint of sin and sustaining of fallen man and creation, a part of the movement towards the consummation, which makes little if any reference to the Saviour. By attributing common grace entirely to the Creator and conceiving of a grace apart from Christ there is effectively created a split between creation and redemption. This quasi-Thomistic viewpoint has serious repercussions. As already noted, creation exists only in relation to God and not autonomously; how then does God relate to his creation except through the Son whom he has sent into the world to redeem the world? Can we even contemplate a grace which is not mediated through the cross? Common grace is a meaningless concept without Christ as the Head of the reborn human race. Without him it could be present only in a temporal cosmos supposedly divorced from Christ; yet creation apart from Christ as its root has no existence.

The entirety of creation is revelational and points towards its fullness of meaning which lies in Christ Jesus. All things in heaven and earth find their meaning in their relation to Christ, he by, for and through whom creation was brought into existence, he who ' is before all things, and in him all things hold together.' (Col.1:17). The development of the world finds its fulfilment in Christ alone. In Revelation 5 we find a vision of God sitting on the throne and in his hand lies the book of God's eternal decrees. Who is found worthy to unseal the book, to effectuate God's decrees? None answer the call.

John weeps bitterly, if the book remains unopened then earthly life remains without meaning and purpose, the Church has no future, creation will perish and there will be nothing but judgement. However one of the elders points to the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, the Lamb of God in the midst of the throne. He has the power, he is worthy to open the book. As the Lamb takes the book from God's right hand the elders break out in hymns of joy, the angels and creatures present join in singing praise to God and to the Lamb. It is the Christ who effectuates the meaning and purpose of the entirety of created reality. None other can.

Does God have differing grounds for being merciful to men, or is Christ the only Mediator between God and men? God upholds the creation ordinances with a view to their fulfilment in Jesus Christ. We shall come no closer to an understanding of the common grace problem until we look at it in the light of God's redemptive work in Christ Jesus leading the world through historical time to its culmination when he comes again and makes all things new. If we *must* speak of common grace let us speak of it in terms of the provision of an area for the operation of special grace. Not as preparation for regeneration but as providing a domain within which the regenerate can work out in their earthly activity that redemption which they already experience. *We must reject any concept of grace which is not rooted in Christ.* Any operation of grace must be rooted in saving grace.

Two hundred and fifty years ago Jonathan Edwards taught that all history is preparation for the coming of Christ, either the Incarnation or the Second Advent.[17] Obviously we have forgotten this in the meantime to such an extent that Berkhof has to remind us that:

> The twentieth-century Church of Christ is spiritually unable to stand against the rapid changes that takes place around her because she has not learned to view history from the perspective of the reign of Christ. For that reason she thinks of the events of her own time in entirely secular terms. She is overcome with fear in a worldly manner, and in a worldly manner she tries to free herself from fear. In this process God functions as no more than a beneficent stop-gap.[18]

Creation

The conception of common grace usually held by English-speaking federal theologians is open to the further and related charge of being anthropocentric and failing to comprehend the fullness of God's work

17 J. Edwards, *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, Edinburgh , 1974, p.536.

18 H. Berkhof, *Christ, the Meaning of History*, Richmond, 1966, p. 15.

of salvation. A reading of the Book of Psalms would indicate that creation in itself is something more than merely the stage upon which is played out the divine drama of man's salvation. The work of Christ is not only the salvation of the innumerable throng of the elect. The work of Christ is nothing less than the redemption of the entire creation from the power and effects of sin. This will be fulfilled when God ushers in the new heaven and the new earth. God's redemptive work has a cosmic dimension and he will not be satisfied until the entire universe has been cleansed of the effects of the fall.

> This redemption (wrought by Christ)... acquires the significance of an all-inclusive divine drama, of a cosmic struggle, in which is involved not only man in his sin and lost condition, but in which are also related the heavens and the earth, angels and demons and the goal of which is to bring back the entire created cosmos under God's dominion and rule.[19]

In II Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1 the word used to designate the newness of the new cosmos is not *veos* but *kaivos*. The word *veos* means new in time or origin, whereas *kaivos* means new in nature or in quality. The expression *oupavov kaivov kai kaivev* (a new heaven and a new earth, Rev. 21:1) means therefore, not the emergence of a cosmos utterly different from the present cosmos, but the emergence of a universe which, though it has been gloriously renewed, stands in continuity with the present universe. The expression 'restore everything' (Acts 3:21) *αποκατασταseos παντον* suggests that the return of Christ will be followed by the restoration of all God's creation to its original perfection - thus pointing to a renewal or restoration of all that was marred by the fall rather than the creation of an entirely new universe.

All of history moves towards this goal: the new heaven and the new earth. The ultimate meaning of transcendent purpose is centred in an expected future in Christ. The goal of Christ's redemption is the renewal of the entire cosmos. The fall affected not only man but brought low the entire creation (Gen. 3:17-18), redemption from sin must involve the totality of creation (Rom. 8:19-23). Calvin speaks of the 'sacramental' nature of the rainbow and the tree of life[20] and indicates that God speaks both to as well as through creation. The Church is itself a token of God's goodness to creation, and of his covenant with all mankind.

The Eschatological Community

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19 H. Ridderbos, *Paul and Jesus,* trans. D. H. Freeman, Philadelphia, 1958 (orig. pub. 1952). p. 77.

20 J. Calvin, *Institutes,* 4. XIV. 18.

It is imperative that we grasp that this age cannot manufacture from within its own fallen configurations the kingdom of God, neither can it receive the kingdom without being sundered and utterly remade (II Pet. 3:10). Whilst our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed (Rom. 13:11), the eschatological kingdom of God is not to be understood as the inevitable consummation of the history of this age. We do not resolve the tensions embedded in the Christian existence by hopefully participating in the progress of society in an endeavour to actualise the kingdom. The kingdom is not something achieved from within, it is something which is encountered from outwith in Christ Jesus. The kingdom of God is from above; it is supernatural and cannot be brought about by human endeavour or apart from God. The perfected kingdom of God is in heaven and must be sought there. We cannot wrench it from there prematurely. The kingdom of God is ever the kingdom of God, and is never the People's Republic of Mankind.

We live within this age and our every activity is marked by it. We never completely lift our feet out of the clinging mud which draws us back to the swamp, every step forward leaves its muddy trail. In our endeavour to fulfil the creation mandate we subdue the earth, but do so with the methods of fallen humanity. We try to provide cheap energy and in doing so create nuclear poisons which last more than a millenium. Our attempts to provide enough food result in monoculture with increased use of insecticides and also in Scottish farmers being paid for not producing food whilst elsewhere men, women and children, who bear the image of God starve to death. We continue in the line of Lamech (Gen. 4:19-24), the son of Methusela whose own sons brought forth the most important cultural achievements of their day: Jabal, the father of all who live in tents and raise livestock. Jubal, father of all who pay the harp and flute. Tubal-Cain, who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron. From these cultural achievements we get 'Lamech's Sword Song', the first recorded poetry of mankind in which Lamech sings of the glory of personal revenge.

Brian Hebblethwaite forcefully reminds us:

> History has a transcendent goal in the divine intention, and that in the end God's creative purpose will be finally realised.... Christianity does not teach that this goal will be achieved automatically through the outworking of processes built into the created order from the beginning. Rather the basis for Christian hope for the consummation of all things in God lies firmly in

God's own recreative, transforming, resurrecting power and action.[21]

The eschatological perspective of the New Testament embodies an unflinching condemnation of belief in an evolutionary progress towards a utopian society. The concretisation of the kingdom is spoken of as that which 'comes' not that which is 'reached'. We do not progress to the kingdom along a path of clearly marked-out steps using cultural building blocks to hasten the day when the light will dawn. The light indeed already shines into the darkness, but the brighter the light shines the deeper the shadow it casts (Jn. 1:4-5). Nowhere is this more clearly marked than in the ministry of our Lord. The coming of the light was welcomed by an unleashing of the powers of darkness on an unprecedented scale. Calvin realistically points out that:

> The more pressingly God offers himself to the world in the gospel and invites men into his kingdom the more boldly will wicked men belch forth the poison of their impiety.[22]

Life between times is marked by the ongoing conflict between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan.

> For our struggle is not with flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph. 6:12)

The great eschatological events are not limited to the moment of consummation of human history. Rather, because Christ has died and risen again we are in the midst of these eschatological events at this moment. At the end, Christ will come again and utterly overthrow the forces of evil. Meanwhile we are involved in an anticipatory, continual defeating of Satan in the proclamation and living of the Word.

The believer, born again of the Spirit, experiencing the rule of Christ in his or her own life, does not exist and is not saved apart from the world. Rather the eschatological reordering of the world occurs at this moment – in embryo – in the believer and the Church, the community of those redeemed through God's special grace. Thus any cultural involvement or political activism on the part of the Christian cannot be based upon a concept of Christless grace. Rather it must be based on the concept of the Church as the body of Christ on earth, the pivotal expression of Christ's redeeming and renewal of creation standing at the cutting edge of history, the city set on a hill whose light beckons all who live in darkness. The Church is the

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21 B. Hebblethwaite, *The Christian Hope,* Basingstoke, 1984, preface; cf. J. Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World,,* Edinburgh, 1897, pp. 354-355.

22 J. Calvin, *Commentary on II Peter,* 3:3.

eschatological community dynamically exhibiting the future already possessed, pointing and calling the world to its destiny. Ephesians 1:10 does not say that all are the Church, but rather that Christ's headship over all creation is for the sake of the Church. And so that purpose of God in the election of special grace embraces the entire created order.

The eschatological discourses of Jesus and of Paul indicate a relentless conflict for the Church upon earth. Our eschatological teaching and reflection is not to find its centre in the use of pocket calculators nor in baptising the products of a supposedly Christless common grace in an effort to advance the kingdom of God, but in an active and patient hope. Calvin reminds us:

> Not that the glory and majesty of Christ's kingdom will only appear at his final coming, but that the completion is delayed till that point – the completion of those things that started at the resurrection, of which God gave his people only a taste, to lead them further along the road of hope and patience.[23]

Calvin further assures us that: 'The kingdom of God increases, stage upon stage, to the end of the world.'[24] This does not, however, indicate an evolutionary cultural progress by which the fallen creation is recreated piece by piece in its original harmony. The meaning of the history of the world is contained within the history of salvation which is visible within the church. This is so clear that Abraham Kuyper, the foremost exponent of common grace, could write:

> To be sure, there is nothing wrong with saying that all things occur for the sake of Christ, that therefore the *Body of Christ* constitutes the dominant element in history, and that this validates the confession that the Church of Christ is the pivot around which, in fact, the life of mankind turns. He who ignores or denies this can never discover unity in the course of history. . . Not *common* grace but the order of *particular* grace obtains.[25]

Believers are the 'first–fruits' of Christ's work. We are called to obedient action in prophetic proclamation of the gospel of the Kingdom of God. That kingdom of God is a spiritual reality showing itself in the inward renewal of the soul and the outward obedience of life.

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23 J. Calvin, *Commentary on Matthew,* 24:29.

24 J. Calvin, *Commentary on Matthew,* 6:10.

25 A. Kuyper, De Gemeene Gratie, Vol. I (Leiden, 1902), 3rd impression, Kampen, 1931, p. 223.

Christian action is faith's anticipation of the age yet to come, a revelation of the miracle of special grace in the lives of God's elect. Cultural activity *pro Rege* flows from regeneration; only thus can we have Christian culture, politics, etc. The history of salvation which becomes visible in the church contains the kernel of the history of the world. Here it is that the renewal embracing the whole of creation emerges and becomes clear. The kingdom of God is the kingdom of special grace. That renewal which takes place in the church is the renewal of the creation. We cannot divorce the destiny of the cosmos from the destiny of the church.

T. F. Torrance reminds us that:

> Through the church . . . the new humanity in Christ is already operative among men, and it is only through the operation of that new humanity that this world of ours can be saved from its own savagery and be called into the kingdom of Christ in peace and love.[26]

Our eschatology, if it is to be biblical, must be an activist eschatology because behind history lies God's decreeing will. To create a simplistic either/or polarization between pietism and social activism is to wrench the fullness of truth apart. False polarities result merely in mutual silence encountering mutual deafness. We are not given the choice of either a pietistic retreat from the world in cultural despair or of a Christianised social activism utilising the analysis of fallen humanity such as Marxism or the New Right. To raid the storehouse of the fallen as though it were an armoury stocked by God's common grace for our use is to misunderstand both the present reality and our final destination. In building a Christian understanding of creation, culture and history we can examine in depth the work of unbelievers, we can profit from the truths which they unavoidably uncover, but this must be done without falling prey to the lure of synthesising Christianity by common grace baptised. Action in the world must always by *pro Rege,* for Christ the King. New wine cannot be contained by old wineskins.

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26 T. F. Torrance, Foreword to Heinrich Quistorp, *Calvin's Doctrine of Last Things,* p. 8.