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THE MODERN ESCHATOLOGICAL DEBATE

(Concluded)

X

THERE seems little doubt that the New Testament gives us teaching on eschatology without committing itself to any specific conception of time. It is usually content to express the truth in terms of limited or limitless duration. On the analogy of the doctrine of the Trinity, however, where a formed doctrine is not given either, it may be that the eschatological teaching of the New Testament requires definite clarification in our theology. If so, must we not go on to form a time-concept on the analogy of the Incarnation? Must we not say with Karl Barth that because the Word has become flesh it has also become time? (*Kirchliche Dogmatik* 1/2, p. 55; see 2/1, pp. 50 f., and 3/2, pp. 524 ff.) And further, that we have to do with that new time here and now even in the midst of old time? That would mean that the eschatological tension is to be thought of as between new time in the new creation, and old time as we still know it in the continuation of this fallen world. That would also mean that new time is as yet concealed under the form and fashion of old time, or—shall we say?—under the likeness of sinful time.

To work out this relation carefully we must undoubtedly go back to its ground in the Incarnation, for in the person of Jesus Christ, in His God-Manhood, we have consummated already the union of the eternal and the temporal. And may we not think of that helpfully in terms of the great Chalcedonian doctrine of the hypostatic union? Just as in Christ God and man are united in such a way that there is neither fusion on the one hand nor yet separation on the other, without any diminishing of the completeness or perfection of deity or of humanity, so here too we may think of there having taken place in the Incarnation as it were a hypostatic union between the eternal and the temporal in the form of new time. And just as Christ for ever lives our Mediator and our Atonement, in whom all things cohere, and in whom all things in heaven and earth will be brought back to the fullness of God, so we must think here of a union between the eternal kingdom of God and the new creation, indeed a union between the eternal and time made new in Christ Jesus, and of that as an abiding union even in the heart of our world's estrangement. But here we must go a step beyond Chalcedon and, remembering that the Captain of our salvation was made perfect through suffering, carry the hypostatic union

in our thought through the Cross to its perfection in the Resurrection. We must think therefore of the union between the kingdom of God and new time as having in Christ entered into the heart of our alienation from God, into the heart of the conflicts of history, and in the teeth of all the contradictions of sin and all the abstractions (in T. E. Hulme's sense of the word) of fallen time as having perfected itself through the Cross and Resurrection into the abiding triumph of a perfection in God which both consummates the original purposes of creation and crowns it with glory.

Now we are able to see that the eschatological tension is really twofold. It is the union achieved in the tension between the eternal and the temporal, and also in the tension between the holy and the sinful. The central fact in this for eschatology is this: that the union of the eternal and the temporal, or (as we have spoken of it earlier) the bringing together of the apocalyptic and prophetic views of the Kingdom, in the conditions of our humanity and our history inevitably creates a new tension—that between the new creation and the fallen world. Eschatologies make shipwreck of themselves when they concentrate on one or the other of those two tensions. "Realized teleology" concentrates upon the relation between the new creation and the old as if it were the perfected union of the eternal and the temporal, where the tendency is to jump straight into the Kingdom of heaven from the incarnational fact of Bethlehem, without due acknowledgement of a perfection achieved only through the Cross. "Realized eschatology" concentrates upon the relation between the eternal and the temporal in terms of the tension between the new and the old, where the tendency is to think of the Kingdom of God as jumping into the midst through the crucial fact of the Cross and the Resurrection without due acknowledgment of the incarnational fact of Bethlehem. Both these views eliminate the eschatological tension here and now, the former because it thinks of the teleological end as realized here and now, the latter because it thinks of the eschatological end as realized here and now. However, against both these views Christology teaches us that the entry at Bethlehem and its perfection, in the Cross and Resurrection, of an abiding union between God and man, because it is the first-fruits of the new creation, inevitably entails conflict in the conditions of time and history. That is why, although we must say that the Kingdom of God has come already and come in power, we must also say

that the conflict continues in time just because the new creation is here and now breaking up the old until the hour when the veil of sense and time in the fallen world will be torn aside and the Kingdom of God will come at last with observation in the new heaven and the new earth.

It is because the teleological end must be interpreted eschatologically, placing the decisive event in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that we must reject all liberal doctrines of a Kingdom of progress. It is because the eschatological end must be interpreted teleologically that we must reject equally the view that the *Parousia* is past and gone and the Kingdom fully present because it has been completely realized in the resurrection and ascension of Christ. Behind both views there lies a faulty Christology. But just because the decisive event in the birth, death and resurrection of Christ entails in our fallen world a new creation we must go on to teach a doctrine of eschatological fulfilment or development through history. That is why the New Testament ends with the Apocalypse.

Apocalypse in its deepest sense is the unveiling of Jesus Christ, who has come into our world and history as the suffering Servant or the Lamb of God, as the transcendent Son of God. At His death and resurrection the veil of the Temple was torn aside and men beheld the glory of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth. In Jesus Christ we think of the Kingdom of God as having entered our world, as veiled behind history, behind the forms and fashions of this age, so that we are unable to see it directly, just as men were unable to discern the Christ behind the likeness of sinful flesh except by revelation or apocalypse. The pattern of that Kingdom cannot be discerned by the inspection of the course of history. But in the Spirit on the Day of the Lord it is possible for faith to see proleptically if only under the shadow of God's hand something of the glory of God that passes through history. Apocalypse therefore is the unveiling to faith of history already invaded and conquered by the Lamb of God. Apocalypse is the unveiling to faith of the new creation as yet hidden from our eyes behind the ugly shapes of sinful history, but a new creation already consummated and waiting for eschatological unfolding or fulfilment in the advent presence of Christ. No doubt we are unable to trace the lineaments of the Kingdom of God in history, but it is nevertheless a fact that even now God governs

and orders the course of the world so as to make all things to work together for good, and even the wrath of men to praise Him. The key of the ages, the clue to history, is Christ crucified, the Lamb of God. It is the man who in faith has seen the veiling and unveiling of Jesus Christ who can penetrate apocalyptically behind the guilt and wrath of history and see the veiling and unveiling of God's Kingdom in it all. And yet even the children of faith will be surprised at the last day, as our Lord taught in the parable (Matt. xxv. 31 ff.). The achievements of the Church in time are not what they appear, for even when she has done that which she ought to do she must confess that she is an unprofitable servant. The Kingdom of God is concealed even behind the forms and fashions of the Church, all of which must pass away at the final judgment. Only God can fulfil the purpose of history. The New Jerusalem comes down from above.

God has already put everything under the feet of Christ, but Christ must reign nevertheless until all His enemies are put under His feet (1 Cor. xv. 27, 32). We do not see that as yet, but we do see Jesus (Heb. ii. 8). That is the faith and hope of the Church. Between the times faith and hope are confirmed and nourished by the two sacraments of the Word made flesh, baptism and holy communion, which are essentially signs belonging to the fullness of time, that is to say filled with the complete incarnate presence of the Son of God, who gives Himself to us in forgiveness and reconciliation through the cross and the resurrection. In baptism that is communicated in a once-and-for-all sense, in which the wholeness of Christ and the completeness of our salvation are particularly enshrined. In baptism we have to do with the new creation, the perfect body of Christ into which we become incorporated. In holy communion, on the other hand, we have to do with the continuance of that in conditions of time, with the Church as the bodying forth in this fallen world of communion with Christ. These two sacraments correspond to the twofold tension of Christian eschatology. The doubleness of the eschatological tension of the *Parousia* as both a presence and a coming, as something once for all and yet as the showing forth of that until the Lord come, is enshrined in both of them, but the emphasis upon the once-and-for-all union of God and man, of the eternal and the temporal, falls most heavily upon the sacrament of baptism, while in the sacrament of communion

we have most the emphasis upon the continuation of that in the contradictions and abstractions of fallen time. If in the sacrament of baptism there is enshrined the faith that once for all we have been put in the right with God through Jesus Christ, in the sacrament of holy communion we have the unshakeable conviction that in the presence of Christ we are in the wrong and we need to receive constantly communion in His body and blood "for he that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet". If at baptism we think of our union with Christ as *opus dei* which takes place in and for its own sake, at communion we think of the same union inserted into our flesh and blood, into time and history as we partake of flesh and blood. If at baptism we think of our having died and risen with Christ, new creatures, so that old things are passed away and all things are become new, at holy communion we think of that creation not only as a *datum* but as a *dandum* which must ever be given from moment to moment in the conditions of our passing and sinful world so that every time we communicate is eschatological time (*kairos*) until we drink it new in the Kingdom. Unquestionably, therefore, the two sacraments are given to us to enshrine the double consciousness of the New Testament eschatological faith and hope, to enable us to hold in the grasp of our faith and hope the *Parousia* as both a *real presence* here and now and yet as an *advent presence* still to come. At the same time both sacraments make it quite clear that the Kingdom of God is amongst us not in word only with suspended action, not in Spirit only, but in deed and in power, as real act in time, as word-deed enacted in our flesh and blood and inserted into history. But precisely because it is both, it is both an abiding reality and also an eschatologically repeated event until Christ come.

In view of this teaching from the sacraments there are several things that must be said about the eschatological relation when the union with God in Christ is inserted into history.

(1) It is not an easy relation. Just as it became fact and reality for us once and for all only through the desperate passion of the Cross, so we can only follow Christ by bearing the Cross daily. "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. ii. 20). While on the one hand we are given the real presence of the whole Christ,

yet on the other hand that is to be realized in sacramental obedience enacted into our daily life. It is a reconciliation, as we have seen, thrust into a world that continues in its estrangement from and contradiction to God, and that is why in addition to the sacrament of baptism we have the Eucharist. We are taught thereby that while in new time we are complete in Christ Jesus, yet in the conflicts and abstractions of fallen time we are unable to realize that wholeness, but must nevertheless reckon that we are dead to the old life and created again in the new. That means that while in faith we are a new creation yet we are unable as yet to join body and soul, the invisible and the visible, the material and the spiritual, in any closer union than is given to us in the tensions of the Cross through holy communion. The two sides are joined together only in the death and resurrection of Christ. To add therefore a sacrament of wholeness, of body-soul union, or to transmute the gift of healing from the strenuous domain of petitionary prayer to the sacramental domain is to deny the sacrament of the Eucharist that we must take up our cross daily, die daily, and constantly communicate in the body and blood of Christ. It is to heal the hurt of God's people too lightly, and to evade the fact that it must be inserted into the conditions of time, into the heart of our struggles and conflicts, redeeming the time. It is to deny that although we are redeemed we wait for the redemption of the purchased possession. It is to deny the eschatology of the Eucharist: "As often as ye break this bread and drink this cup, *ye do shew forth the Lord's death till he come.*" However, although the tension between the invisible and the visible, the new and the old, cannot be resolved in time as we know it, it remains the function of the Church in the world to carry the union already perfected in Christ into all the conditions of time, and how the Church is straitened until it is accomplished. The Church has therefore the sacrament set at the heart of her worship in order that she may indeed be the suffering servant in the world, although no doubt she will pray desperately: "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." But let it be quite clear that unless the Church that communicates in the body and blood of our Lord is prepared to throw herself into the heart of the world's trouble, however costly that may be, and act out there the communion which is her very life, she does not take up the cross and follow her Lord. It is thus that "the Kingdom of God presses in and men of

determined purpose lay impatient hands on it" (W. Manson, *Jesus the Messiah*, p. 65). The Church can do that because she knows her Lord in the power of His resurrection.

(2) The perfect union of God and man that has broken into time in the virgin birth, inserted into history at the Cross, and yet is not the prisoner of fallen time because of the resurrection, entails a new creation that travels through old time inasmuch as Christ Jesus lives on. Although we must communicate again and again in the ever given presence of Christ in the sacrament of holy communion, there is a sense in which faith is continuously feeding upon the flesh and blood of Christ, and the Church has eternal life abiding in her (John vi, xv). That is the reality which Romans and Anglicans strive to grasp in their doctrine of apostolic succession construed as temporal and historical continuity. But when it is so construed it fails to realize the important eschatological element in the Eucharist, in which the Church receives every time she communicates the judgment of the Cross upon the forms and fashions of this passing world, even upon the orders of the Church so far as they partake of the forms and fashions of this world. And that judgment in the death of Christ must be shown forth until He come. Nevertheless, behind it all there is the ever-living continuity of Christ Himself, the new creation. And it is precisely because there is that continuity travelling through and under the visible and historical continuities that the latter are disrupted, and inevitably break up, for the axe is laid to the root of the tree. Whenever the Church denies that eschatological element in the Eucharist it becomes a human Church, for it denies then that the Church transcends herself in the new creation, and tries to perpetuate in faith an un-crucified Christ who has not really made all things new in the power of the resurrection. It is precisely because the Church lives on in the power of the resurrection that she must refuse to be imprisoned in the wrappings of human systems and decisions. Because she is already a resurrected body the Church cannot claim, without arresting repentance and quenching the Holy Ghost, that historical succession in this fallen world is of the *esse* of the Church. Nevertheless, we have in the sacraments, in the union between the visible and the invisible, the material and the spiritual, eschatological pointers to the fact that the complete union which we possess in faith here and now will be unveiled finally in a new heaven and new earth, when not only in faith but in the fullness of sight there will be perfect

union between the visible and the invisible, material and spiritual, sense and faith. Apart from that consummation the sacrament of communion has no final meaning, for that consummation is the fulfilled joy of triumph. "Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world."

(3) It is apparent therefore that the wholeness of Christ given to us in the sacraments can be thought of only in terms of eschatological repetition. That is the way in which the continuity of the new creation and of new time is manifest in the midst of old time. It could not be otherwise. Temporal repetition, as in the Roman doctrine of the Mass or the episcopal doctrine of succession, strikes at the heart of the sacrament as *opus dei* and at its once-for-all character. Temporal repetition in whatever form is the attempt to perpetuate the particularity of the Incarnation as extension in fallen time (as though Jesus Christ had not risen again), as something that can continually be taken up and handled, as temporal object secure in the conditions of a fallen world. It is a desire to possess God, and to domesticate the Spirit in the continuity of space and time, and confounds the wholeness of Christ with a degenerate historical catholicity. The New Testament Gospels in the accounts of the Transfiguration and the Resurrection appearances teach us that the transfigured and risen Christ cannot be perpetuated in the institutions and conditions of this passing world. He inevitably vanishes out of our sight. We cannot anticipate the Second Advent; of that hour not even the Son of Man knew. Without any doubt whatsoever His real presence is with us, and yet He is still to come. Christ does not communicate Himself to us here and now as He will at the Second Advent, nevertheless it is as fully real as it will be then. In the repeated communicating in the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament, the continual feeding of faith upon Christ (John vi) is crowned with vision, but because Christ is wholly identical with Himself, and the new creation is a new creation and cannot be identified with this present evil world, it is a Christ who vanishes out of our sight again and again, for we walk by faith as yet, not by sight. It is, however, because faith is crowned with vision in the sacrament again and again, the vision of the transcendent Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, who cannot be expressed in terms of this fallen world (Rev. i. 13 ff.), that apocalyptic images are an inner necessity for faith. It is faith reaching forward in eager

expectation of sight because it is faith that has already seen invisibly the risen Saviour. And faith knows that that day will come when Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, will return and the veil will be torn aside and we shall see Him as He is and become like Him.

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