

Eschatology as a Function of the Gospel

This week we bring you an essay on eschatology by the Rev. Dr. Steven C. Kuhl, the Executive Director of Crossings.

It's an essay Steve wrote this summer, in response to a millennial-aged student ("Kelly") in his college course called "Introduction to Christianity." As you'll see from Steve's comments, the course uses a textbook called *Introducing Christianity*, by James R. Adair (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), which Steve uses as a jumping-off point for deeper discussions with his students. This particular discussion took place on the course's online discussion board, and Kelly's initial comment and final response are included to give context to Steve's thoughts.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Eschatology as a Function of the Gospel: An attempt to help a Millennial to go beyond Millenarianism.

By Steven C. Kuhl

Kelly's Comment: I find the topic of eschatology compelling, and much more diverse in expectation or "approach," than I expected after reading Adair. As we have seen the evolution of what is viewed as doctrine accepted over time, the topic of the world ending also changes over time as well. I question why the event or thought of the world ending even exists? I am somewhat compelled to think of it as a "motivator" for humanity to lead a Christian life as there is a "dark looming cloud" out there...I do

not want to call it a “threat” but...one day, we all will have our judgment day. Is this to help drive our moral compass, to live righteously, to instill conscience? I sometimes think of it as a fearful event, but if I am Christian...there is nothing for me to worry about as I will be saved.

I have read about the apocalypse, have read about the different theories regarding the several years of Tribulation...but no one really knows if we will be witness to this, or be carried off spiritually prior to the event, knowing that we are Christians. I also find it interesting that we have had so many events that have been sensationalized in the media as the last coming...for example the millennial change 1999-2000? I think we did alright...

Dr. Kuhl's Response: Kelly, You make good comments and raise important questions on the discussion of eschatology. I wish we could talk face to face because there are so many assumptions that need to be uncovered, clarified, challenged, and redirected in this topic. Of course, as I've noted elsewhere, Adair, in our textbook, is looking at the totality of the Christian Tradition from two distinct methodological standpoints. The first approach proceeds from a “historical” point of view and entails a rehearsal of church history, identifying key developments in various ages. The second approach, which we are using now, is called a “phenomenological” approach and it proceeds by looking at contemporary Christianity as a whole and identifying the diversity of views that are therein. Remember, as Adair noted earlier, when we speak of “Christianity” we mean those traditions that have emerged in history that agree with the basic theological outlook of the Councils of Nicene, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon (the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Formula) on the topics of the Trinity and the person of Christ. Defining Christianity this way helps us to focus the discussion.

In this week's chapter, Adair identifies five theological themes (by no means exhaustive) that are important to contemporary Christianity: the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, justification by faith, church and state relations, and eschatology. You ask: Why does the topic of eschatology even come up? Is it to motivate Christian behavior? I would say "No" to that, but more on that later. The more basic reason it is an important topic is because not everything that Jesus has promised to those who place their trust in him has yet come to pass. Eschatology addresses the concern to bring comfort to believers who still wait for unfulfilled promises, who still languish under the burdens of this world, by which I mean their sin, the law's accusation, and death as its wage.

Unfortunately, Adair does not describe that kind of eschatology. His discussion overlooks the wide range of eschatological thought that has emerged since WWII, especially among those who would be called "Mainline Christians." Mainly he focuses on those "traditions" (broadly termed as Conservative Evangelical, Fundamentalist, and Pentecostal) that define eschatology primarily as a function of "millenarianism," a preoccupation with predicting the sequence of future events about the promised return of Christ that revolves around a literal 1,000- (hence, "mille") year reign of peace on earth. To be sure, not all millenarians or millennialists agree. Postmillennialists, on the one hand, believe that Christ will return to rule *after* (hence, "post") humanity has established a 1,000 year reign of peace on earth. It was popular in the 19th century when a spirit of optimism was fueled by the Industrial Revolution. Premillennialists, on the other hand, believe Christ will come *before* (hence, "pre") the 1,000-year reign of peace on earth. Disillusioned by 19th-century optimism and liberalism, they believe Christ will establish his millennial reign according to a sequence of events in which 1) the Antichrist

will inflict a "great tribulation" upon the earth, 2) accompanied by the rapture (escape) of true Christians, 3) followed by the Second Coming of Christ in glory to conquer the Antichrist, 4) bringing about his subsequent enthronement to a 1,000-year reign of peace on earth, 5) after which "the end." All this comes from a quasi-literal preoccupation with certain apocalyptic books of the Bible (whose symbolic language is understood as having predictive value on future theological events) and the assumption that if one can discern the signs of the times one is better off.

I want to leave this Millenarian view behind for now and present a view of eschatology that sees it not as a function of predicting future theological events but as a function of the Gospel. Eschatology, then, gets its meaning when it is seen in light of Jesus' first coming, particularly, the saving work he accomplished in his death and resurrection. With that as our interpretive key, Biblical eschatology must always be interpreted as a function of Biblical soteriology (= God's plan of salvation through Christ) and not as independent futuristic speculation. Let me explain.

Eschatology, which literally means "last things," refers to those "good things" that Christians are still waiting for. Jesus' work is not yet done; he must return to bring to fruition the fullness of what he has promised and procured in his death and resurrection. The Creeds (Nicene and Apostles') give us some hint as to what those "last things" are: namely, "the resurrection of the body and life everlasting." What believers have already received by faith is "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins" and fellowship with a community of believers ("the communion of saints"); what they await, in faith, is the fulfillment of the promised "new creation" or new life: a new resurrected (bodily) self that lives eternally, with 'eternally' meaning "with God." Eternal life means not just

“unending life” but the “divine” life. To be sure, it includes “no ending,” for God is eternal in that sense, but it also means more than that. It means the kind of life God enjoys we will enjoy. It’s like children in a family: they enjoy and participate in the very life or living that their parents live in. So it is also with regard to the children of God: what is Christ’s is theirs and what is theirs is Christ’s. For they are afforded the same status before God as the Son of God, Jesus Christ, enjoys: to be children of God and heirs of eternal life. That is Christ’s promise to his believing disciples; that is why he says they can address his Father as their Father in the Lord’s Prayer. Of course, what all is entailed in this divine life has not yet been revealed to us: so the category “eternal life” will have to suffice for now. Christians will know what it means when it comes to pass, just as Christians claimed to know what the Old Testament promises about the messiah meant when the messiah, Jesus Christ, came and did his dying and rising to reconcile God and humanity. For now, before the fulfillment, Christians live in faith and anticipation of great things to come: the resurrection of the body and life eternal. Eschatology is important because it assures believers that they are not “left behind,” so to speak, and so it assures them to be patient in the midst of this world’s trials and live lovingly in the present with hope.

Of course, there are also what might be called “troubling things” that are also still to come. Just as Christians await the final fulfillment of their redemption from sin, so they also, along with the whole world, await the final judgment that must come because of their sin.

As you may recall, when we talked about original sin, we said that sin refers to a congenital, oppositional defiant characteristic in humanity that sets humanity in opposition to God. Sin designates the fact that I am by nature self-centered

versus God-Centered; that I make myself the measure of all things rather than God, who is the creator and rightful owner of all things. To top it off, Christians know that God is the accuser of sinful humanity, including themselves, and that God's accusation coincides with the everyday experience of law that permeates every aspect of human life.

Therefore, a central aspect of eschatology is that everybody is entitled to his or her day in court; everyone has the right to meet his or her accuser. That is only fair—and that is what the Day of Judgment is all about: our right to fairness, our right to try to justify ourselves, our right to our day in court with our accuser. For just as our civil justice system ensures the right of accused criminals to have their day in court (and we as Americans prize that right), so also God ensures that right for accused sinners. But note: that kind of fairness is hardly joy-inducing, especially if the evidence is stacked up against us. Nevertheless, sooner or later, every human being will have their day in court before God and face the consequences for how they have lived.

Not only do Christians accept the rightness of a Day of Judgment (and note: they are not the only religious tradition to do so; Jews and Muslims do as well), they also believe, in a sense, that they have already faced that Day. For inasmuch as Christians take to heart Jesus' message "to repent and believe the good news," the agenda of Judgment Day is being settled out of court. For Jesus is the "end-time Judge" who has come "in the mean time" to settle out of court with those who wish to do so. And what a settlement it is! He promises to make our sin and death his sin and death and, in return, to make his righteousness and life our righteousness and life. And where is this settlement sealed? In his cross and resurrection. On the cross he volunteered to bear the full consequences of human sin, and in his resurrection he earned the right to give out his

righteousness to whoever would receive it. To be sure, this kind of settlement is not to be forced on anyone; it is received by faith alone. That is why the settlement is always presented as an offer and never a demand and is always received as a gift and not an imposition.

For Christians, then, the Last Judgment will be, for all practical purposes, a formality. It is not something they face in fear, but in hope, because they already know the Judge's verdict; their settlement is secured by faith in the end-time Judge, Jesus. Therefore, there is nothing more comforting for Christians than when the Nicene Creed says "he [Jesus] will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." For they know this Judge Jesus. They know that he has already offered them forgiveness free for the believing. They already know that the outcome of that Day of Judgment was sealed on the day they were introduced to Jesus (often in baptism) and believed in his promise (a moment hard to mark, but easy to know that it has happened). For Christians, then, Judgment Day means that they will enter into "eternal life," a life reconciled with God because of their well-placed faith in the Judge, Jesus.

You asked, Kelly, about the logic behind this teaching: Is it meant to "motivate" people to live the Christian life? It depends on what you mean by "motivate." If you mean "scare them into some kind of moral compliance," then the answer is no. If you mean "assure them that Jesus will fulfill his promises," then the answer is yes. Eschatology is about creating hope and patience, not fear and anxiety. Nevertheless, there still might be reason for people to have fear and anxiety. Indeed, whenever we come to a knowledge of our own sin—which is always evoked by the reality of law—it is certainly appropriate to respond to that knowledge in fear. But that's not the purpose of eschatology. On the contrary, if anyone has fear and anxiety about their sin and how they fare before God, eschatology as a

function of the Gospel is precisely the antidote.

Although fear and anxiety are the last things the teaching on eschatology is meant to produce, I admit, unfortunately, that the doctrine is often presented that way. Indeed, for the most part the millenarian positions Adair presents all tend, in my judgment, to deteriorate eschatology into that kind of message. It is certainly, in my judgment, the message that the *Left Behind* series presents to its readers. As a rule, Adair is cautious in his criticisms of the dispensational premillennialist outlook that the *Left Behind* series presents in popular, entertainment format. But even as he consistently adheres to his phenomenological approach (with its commitment to deep description, not theological critique), Adair cannot help but offer a kind of political critique of the outlook. “Non-dispensationalists,” he says, “sometimes accuse dispensationalists of trying to influence international politics in an effort to set events in motion that will ultimately result in Christ’s Second Coming, such as policies designed (their critics say) to inflame Israeli-Arab dissention” (p. 369). That tendency of dispensationalists to glory in Middle Eastern tragedy in order to buttress their end-times outlook is linked precisely to the fact that for them eschatology is a function of predicting the future and not proclaiming the Gospel. If any one of the categories of eschatology that Adair identifies fits the approach I have described here it would be the amillennialist approach which Adair links to Augustine and which he says has been the dominant approach for much of the history of Christianity. But that is a history-of-theology topic for another time.

I know this is a long response. I hope it is helpful.

Kelly’s reply: That was very nice of you to provide such expansive thoughts in this response...that takes much time... and I

appreciate that in you and am sure many other students do as well. Thank you for your time to explain.