

Church Doctrine Part 8
Eschatology, The Doctrine of death, judgement, and the final destiny of the soul
and of humankind

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It would be irresponsible of me to try and have a conversation about eschatology without at least tipping my hat to the Apocalypse.

I have to admit though, I was tempted to skip it because when the subject comes up people tend to cringe.

Does it make you all cringe?

Or is it just me?

I think a lot of us are carrying around at least a little bit of apocalyptic baggage.

I acquired mine in 1981, the year I was a Baptist.

A lot of interesting things that happened that year, but my most vivid memory is of the little cartoon books they call tracts.

People were always handing me tracts for some reason, and they covered a lot of different topics, but it seemed that the most popular tracts were the ones that portrayed the Battle of Armageddon with the anti-Christ and the dreaded Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

And at the center of this final battle between good and evil was the action-hero Jesus, who was in no mood to turn the other cheek.

These tracts were not for the faint of heart; you could almost smell the reek of sulfur coming off of them, but as long as you were covered in the blood of the lamb you were safe...

And that was my introduction to the apocalypse, and eschatology and all those end of times topics that make us cringe.

So it was a relief to discover that in the UCC, we're more focused on bringing about God's Heavenly Kingdom right here and now, which, for the most part, *is* our eschatology.

And I believe that's a pretty good eschatology to have – except – we don't really *talk* about eschatology.

Most mainline preachers will actually go out of their way to *avoid* talking about eschatology – and even our lectionaries tend to veer away from the subject.

And I think that's because so many of us have been exposed to bad eschatology theology.

Eschatology is the study of last things. The word eschatology literally means “Last Words,” speaking of final things. It is the theology of how it will all end.

The word “apocalypse” comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis*. Which means “to uncover.”

And in the NT, there are numerous references to an uncovering – or to the Apocalypse. In fact, the Book of Revelation is often referred to as “The Apocalypse,” because it claims to uncover what is going to happen when the end of the world comes.

So we don't really talk about these things – we know they're there – but we tiptoe around them because they are uncomfortable, and mostly irrelevant to our daily lives.

But I'm not so sure that it's a good idea to avoid talking about the end of the world. Because as it turns out, the end of the world is, and has always been, a topic of great interest to all kinds of people –

Including Jesus.

That's right. Jesus talked about eschatology all the time – and not just in a few isolated verses either, but all throughout the Gospels.

Classic Christian eschatology includes all kinds of uncomfortable concepts like the second coming of Jesus Christ, judgment day, eternal punishment, the rapture, the resurrection of the dead, the tribulation and the antichrist – And these are not concepts that came much later –

This stuff is Biblical...

Eschatology did not even originate with Christianity. Christian eschatology is rooted in Jewish eschatology, which makes a lot of sense given that Jesus and his followers were Jews.

According to Neil Gillman, a Canadian-American rabbi and philosopher, by the time of Jesus, Jewish eschatology was an evolving process, and in its most highly developed form, it had three dimensions: a universal dimension, a national dimension, and an individual dimension.¹

He says the universal dimension goes all the way back to Isaiah's vision from the 8th century B.C.E. of a world at peace, where justice prevails, and there is a universal recognition of the one God, the God of Israel.

The national dimension brings all of the Jews home from exile –

And the individual dimension gets down to the brass tacks by asking the question that is on everyone's mind – what happens to me after I die.

And all of this eschatology evolved long before Jesus, during Jesus, and after Jesus.

Eschatology has been around for a really long time; it is the product of a lot of deep thinking, and a lot of people take it *very* seriously.

And I think we should too. Because it is a huge chunk of our faith tradition. And it is important to our fellow humans. And Jesus talked about it – a lot!

If we take a look at the OT, we see that Israel's history was a long history of military and political upheavals. Going all the way back to the death of Solomon, someone was always trying to take over Israel.

So, people began to talk about a day that God would act to rescue them from all these foreign occupiers, and that day became known as "the day of the Lord."

Throughout the OT, there are scattered references, to what is called "the day of the Lord," and these verses proclaim that on "the day of the Lord," God will enter

¹ Crosscurrents. HOW WILL IT ALL END? Eschatology in Science and Religion Neil Gillman @ <http://www.crosscurrents.org/GillmanSpring07.pdf>

directly into human history to save all the good people, and destroy or subjugate everyone else.

Over time, “the day of the Lord” became more apocalyptic in meaning – and ultimately came to mean the termination of human life on this planet.

Now of course not all Jews thought the world would end soon – but some believed it, and one of those believers was Jesus of Nazareth – at least according to scripture.

So whatever else we might say about Jesus, we cannot ignore his belief that the end of the world was imminent.

We cannot ignore his claims that the world would be terminated shortly after his crucifixion.

And we cannot ignore the part where he said he would be back shortly – to usher in the end of the world – at least the world as we know it.

We cannot ignore these things about Jesus. Because none of those things happened. The world did not end; he did not come back, and we are still here.

If we take the bible seriously, and I do, then we cannot ignore these things.

Did he really say he was coming back?

The first hundred years of the Common Era were not pretty for some people. It was open season on Christians AND Jews alike.

Jerusalem was destroyed forty or so years after Jesus, and everyone was either dead or scattered.

Christians and Jews hated each other and they blamed each other for the mess they were in.

You could say it was – apocalyptic.

But still, he didn't come back.

Did he really say that he was coming back?

The world seemed to be beyond redemption. There was no way out – no way of reform – no way of renewing the world enough to make it worth living in. They were ready for the world to end and begin again entirely new.

The early church produced many apocalyptic books, the book of Revelation is only one of them – and the Dead Sea Scrolls are nearly all apocalyptic literature.

So did he really say he was coming back???

No one knows. But what we do know is that all of human history is full of conflict, suffering, and evil.

It is filled with apocalypses that come in the shape of war, plagues, volcano, tsunamis, hurricanes, and floods.

And when things are apocalyptic, what do people do? They start looking for a savior, and they start looking for a cosmic reboot.

They start telling stories and speculating on “the day of the Lord.”

But here’s the problem with that. If people are sitting around waiting for the world to end, then how interested are they going to be in taking good care of it? How interested are they going to be in changing anything that might be a problem? How interested are they going to be in confronting injustices like slavery, racism, poverty or global warming...???

If you believe the world is ending any minute, you’re not going to care about what condition it’s in. I mean that would be like cleaning your oven right before hauling the stove off to the dump right? It would be crazy!

Rebecca Parker, co-author of “A House for Hope”² says:

Mesmerized by stark, apocalyptic either/or choices in a complex world, people drive toward solutions that place hope in destruction. Such theologies imagine that the promise of a new heaven and a new earth – a new paradise garden with its river and trees of life – will arrive in a future on the other side of apocalypse. In the meantime, they bless war and offer no resistance to environmental abuses.

² A House for Hope: the promise of progressive religion for the twenty-first century

There are a lot of people who are keen to abuse the environment. As one leading U.S. senator put it, people cannot be expected “to worry about the environment. Why care about the earth when the droughts, floods, famine, and pestilence brought by ecological collapse are signs of the apocalypse foretold in the Bible?”

This senator doesn't care one way or another about the end of the world. He cares about drilling, or fracking, or building a pipeline or whatever it is that he promised to the lobbyist who got him elected.

But what he does not care about is the apocalypse or about the damage he is inflicting on the world.

And this is why I think we need to take our eschatology seriously.

Because what if Jesus didn't really say he was coming back?

What if there's no reboot?

What if the “new creation” begins the instant we set aside our superstitions and our fears and we get to work repairing the damage we've done to ourselves and our environment?

If that's true, then that changes everything. It means we need a whole new eschatology, one where we live fully – all the way to the very edges – right now – here on earth – just as it is in heaven.

This life, this world is full of Christ – he's here right now, so how can he come back if he's always here?

And we can experience him right now – today – if we just let ourselves.

For instance, every time we forgive someone. When you forgive someone don't you kind of get a tingle of the divine?

Or every time we choose nonviolence over violence, or love our neighbor, or stand up to injustices, don't you feel especially tuned into the Christ within us?

How about every time we treat the earth with gentleness and respect, or every time we walk in the sunlight, or laugh in the rain, isn't that just positively divine?

I remember walking in a stream recently with some kids at camp – something I would never just do on my own, but with a bunch of us doing it together it somehow felt safe, and it was, but more than that it was divine; because we were fully in the moment living all the way to the edges, and I don't know, maybe it was just me but it sure felt to be here on earth as it is in heaven.

Our whole Christian story is a prayer for God's Reign to come, because clearly we're not there yet. When we look around us, we see tornadoes, floods, fires, hurricanes, gun violence, drug violence, lying, cheating, stealing, grief, war, heartache...

The pain is there.

It has always been there.

Jesus did not complete the job; it remains to be completed in God's good time.

But because it remains to be completed, we get to be a part of that; and the sooner we get started, the sooner we experience “on earth as it is in heaven”.

According to cosmologists, the world will end ten thousand trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion years after the big bang (which occurred, roughly, 15 billion years ago).

What is the ultimate destiny of the world? What is the ultimate destiny of the people? And, what is the ultimate destiny of the individual human being?

We are told that the thirteenth-century saint, Francis of Assisi, was out hoeing his garden one day when a friend stopped by to visit. The friend asked Francis what he would do if he were to suddenly learn he would die before sunset. Francis paused for a moment, looked around, and then quietly replied, “I think I would finish hoeing my garden.”

May it be with you all according to God's word...Amen

