THE MODERN ESCHATOLOGICAL DEBATE

I

THREE periods appear to stand out in the history of the Church as rich in eschatology; the first century, the age of the Reformation, and the present day. No period has ever been without its eschatology, but as a general rule the theologians have been content to give to it but the last chapters of their works, as if eschatology were a mere addendum to faith and not " the fibre of the living strand " (cf. H. R. Mackintosh, *Immortality and the Future*, pp. 108 f.). The great question that must force itself upon us immediately is this: Why was it that the Church failed so early to grasp and absorb into her whole life and thought the eschatological teaching of the New Testament? And why was it that after the Reformation the Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican Churches largely lost the eschatological note in spite of the fact that their hymns and liturgies are resonant with it? Whatever be the final answer or answers we must give to these questions, it seems clear that the deepest significance of the best Biblical scholarship of our day (as represented, for example, in Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*) is that it is wrestling with precisely this problem, with the result that the new Biblical scholarship is producing an understanding of the Bible unparalleled in the history of the Church since the first century. No one can read the first four volumes of the *Theologisches Wörterbuch* without being profoundly impressed with the fact that scholars from all sides and of many varieties have this in common, that their lexicographical and lexicological studies have forced them back into an exposition of the faith that bears something of the eschatological cast that characterizes all the Scriptures. Undoubtedly the renewed understanding of the Old Testament and its relation to the thought of the New Testament has a great deal to do with this, which would seem to justify the historian in the judgment that whenever the Church has been tempted to tear Christianity from its God-given roots in Hebraic soil, it has destroyed something so essential that its effects bear strange fruit for centuries afterwards.

Undoubtedly the Reformation represented a tremendous recoil from a Latin conception of God worked out into an almost impeccable structure with the aid of Greek logic, and a return to the living God and the dynamic faith of the Bible.

But what was it even in the age of the Reformation, something lacking or something misconceived, that led the Church down the road from Luther to Ritschl, or from Calvin to Schleiermacher, with whom eschatology came to count for nothing at all? It was not that the eschatological element did not pervade the thought of the Reformation, though it was not held so consciously as it often is to-day. It is sometimes said, with grave injustice, that there is no real place given to the doctrine of the last things in Calvin—perhaps because in modern style he had no last chapters on the subject. The significant thing is that Calvin inserted his definite teaching on this subject into the third book of the *Institutes* in connection with the doctrines of the Spirit, Faith, and Justification. The same procedure is true of his *Commentaries* and *Sermons*, and appears to be one which Calvin learned from St. Paul himself, who never set himself deliberately to give teaching on the Last Things (e.g. in Romans) but gives it only incidentally as the need arises, although the whole of his teaching is cast in strong eschatological terms. That is just the way in which it is given in Calvin, for with him every doctrine entails what we now call the *eschatological tension.*

It was a decided return to Christology which first brought this about (cf. Bernard of Clairvaux, whom Calvin cites more than any other apart from Augustine). When salvation is lodged fully in Christ then He in His own person fills the whole vista of faith, while the reality of His presence means the reality of the presence of the Kingdom here and now. But as He ascended and has withdrawn Himself from worldly visibility without detracting from His personal nearness, faith inevitably looks for the hour when the veil will be torn aside, and Christ shall appear in glory and completely substantiate the faith of the Church. But until then the faith of the Church is nourished by justification and the sacraments which are thought of in terms of the God-Manhood of Christ as seen in the light of the Cross and Resurrection particularly. That means that the eschatological tension that reached its acutest point in the person and work of the Mediator is enshrined in the tension between *justus et peccator* and between real presence and bread and wine. To the word of justification the sacraments add the pressure of imminence so that the two together on their Christological basis contain the heart of eschatology.

Another way in which Calvin expresses that eschatological

relation is thus: If Christ Himself is our Salvation, supremely in His own person, then the gift of grace is identical with the Giver. Christ gives Himself to us personally through the duality and unity of Word and Spirit. Therefore faith rests upon a dual ground and carries the eschatological relation at its very heart. It is faith that has apprehended Christ, but in order to apprehend must yet reach out still to apprehend, and so faith exists in the tension of having and not having, but a tension that is secure in the hand of God because it rests upon the fact that the believer is once and for all apprehended by God, and no one can pluck him out of God's hand. That is the absolute certainty behind the humble uncertainty (" I count not myself to have apprehended ") of faith (" I believe, help Thou mine unbelief "). This transmutation of medieval pusillanimity into the humble certainty of faith is particularly clear in Luther.

The eschatological relation is, however, bound up essentially with the historical revelation and action of Christ, as Calvin makes clear through the stress upon the Word, and indeed upon the historical continuity of the Word as the preached Word. The Word is thus the historically mediated event, but because it is bound up inextricably with the Spirit, through the Word preached and through the Spirit as dual but indivisible act, the living Jesus Christ becomes present to faith—and not simply the mystical Son of God, but Jesus Christ the incarnate and historical Son of God. The more seriously the person of this Jesus is taken, and the more the emphasis upon the Word throws faith back upon the historical events of Jesus Christ, the more faith is poised upon historical fulfilment, that is upon the expectation that this same Jesus will reveal Himself personally in the actuality of history. And so faith is made to rest essentially upon a future event as well as upon a past event, and faith must inevitably be expressed in terms of hope also.

We must not forget, however, that the Reformers' conception of faith was marked and to a certain extent shaped by the battles in which they were engaged. Because faith has to do essentially with a transcendent act, a Word about the new man or the new creation, the coming age, it is thrown into tension with, and often into contradiction to, this world and its processes. Thus Calvin sets faith in opposition on the one hand to the worldly view of the Kingdom which identified it with the *Imperium Romanum*, but in opposition on the other hand to the present Kingdom of the mystic, conceived as a static and time-

less reality. The doctrines of justification and the sacraments reflect this double tension supremely and are inevitably misunderstood by those who have a blind spot for eschatology, or who have not the courage to think eschatology into the foundation of faith itself. This was the point that came out most strongly in the controversy over *imputation*, the doctrine which was so grievously misunderstood by the Roman Church and which became the pivot upon which the Counter-Reformation reacted in denunciation of the Reformed faith.

But the Reformers had still another battle to fight—this time against the Anabaptists who conceived of the Kingdom too literally in terms of history and apocalyptic, and of salvation too much in terms of the future. Unfortunately the recoil of the leading Reformers from the excesses of these *Schwärmer* carried with it a recoil from apocalyptic, or at least from thinking out fully the implications of apocalyptic. They tended to restrict eschatology to the eschatological tension, and definite teaching about the Last Things to the subjects of death, judgment, and resurrection. In other words, the separation of eschatological tension from apocalyptic really meant a movement to cut eschatology adrift from history. Looking back we may say that this was a decided weakness in the theology of the Reformation—not however in the prayers and hymns, particularly the Eucharistic prayers and hymns! But when eschatology tends to be cut adrift from history it is governed not so much by the logic of action (divine intervention), as by the logic of ideas (determinism). That is particularly evident in Calvin's more systematic works where the Kingdom of God is conceived too generally in terms of an overarching sovereignty of God and his doctrine of election is conceived in terms of an act of predestination which is pushed back to some still point before and behind time rather than as the living action of the eternal in time. That on its part tended to deaden the relation between the Kingdom of God and history, and to throw the urgency of judgment almost entirely into the future. At any rate the result was that a view of providence and election with the major emphasis laid upon the past, upon a pre-temporal eternity, prevented the inner eschatological tension which characterized every doctrine from reaching its full development in clear teaching about the Second Advent of Christ or at least prevented the teaching about the Second Advent from conditioning the attitude to history. Thus it came to lack the urgency so characteristic of

the New Testament view of the Kingdom as imminent in time. The nearest approach to an integration of eschatology and history is to be found in the post-Reformation federal theology, but that was too predestinarian and had borrowed too much from Aristotle and the Schoolmen to leave room for a living eschatology.

The New Testament looks towards a historical future, and a redemption of the whole world, but from the angle of the fallen world and its history that can only be expressed apocalyptically —unless one is to follow Rome in her false elision of the temporal and the eternal or the mystics in their ultimate denial of history. The Reformation failed to bring out this New Testament emphasis with sufficient strength, and so paved the way for the denial of eschatology in Neo-Protestantism. To weaken the relation between eschatology and history means that the inner eschatological form of faith becomes lost.

II

We cannot undertake here any account of the history of the doctrine through the centuries till the present day, except to say that it is the story of the gradual elimination of the eschatological element from its central place in the Church and of its increasing secularization which in Marxian Socialism becomes a movement of great power. The rise of this secularized eschatology cannot but be regarded as a severe judgment on the Christian Church, for it means that the Church has so failed to bear witness to the Cross of Christ as the power of God (for the weakness of God is stronger than men) that the nations have separated the eschatological and social message of the Church from Christ Jesus and have harnessed it to the ruthless forces of modern science.

The gradual *Enteschatologisierung* (as the Germans call it) has had effects within the Churches themselves which must be noted.

(*a*) The main teaching about the Last Things in the West (apart from isolated thinkers like Bengel) has largely been left to sects whose roots go back into the Anabaptist tradition. Although the extremes of those early *Schwärmer* have not been

repeated to the same extent in modern times, it still remains true that their modern successors have developed an eschatological emphasis that is one-sided in its divorce of the apocalyptic view of the Kingdom as other-worldly, coming at the end of time, from the prophetic view of the Kingdom as breaking into the midst of time and involving history, and therefore is constantly on the brink of becoming fantastic. Against this apocalyptic eschatology divorced from actual history the Church will always be in revolt, for apocalypse can only have Christian meaning in the closest association with present history.

(*b*) When the Church came to formulate her teaching about death and judgment, the life everlasting and the return of Christ, she tended to append it to the end of Dogmatics rather uncertainly, failing to grasp these doctrines aright in themselves, and failing to take up the New Testament stress upon eschatology as integral to the very heart of the Gospel and to every doctrine of the faith. In a tradition such as this the words of H. R. Mackintosh have great point: " It is a just and illuminating thought that every system of theology should be read backwards at least once, commencing with the last things, since it is in the conclusion that we find the truest index to the whole " (*Immortality and the Future*, p. 109).

(*c*) When the Church came to relate the Kingdom of God to history, idealism took the place of eschatology. The Church cannot live or work without a goal, an end or a *telos*, and without having some idea of the *eschaton*. But there is a vast difference between an ideal end in the Greek sense and the New Testament *eschaton*, the end that has in Christ broken into time, for all the formal similarity that they may bear. The difference between the two conceptions is precisely the core of the Christian Gospel. The Greek end is always an ideal end. Man is not what he ought to be, but no matter how much he tries individually or in history to be what he ought to be, the end is still ideal and beyond his grasp. In the Christian Gospel this end has broken into the present and is even now operative in the world through the message of the Gospel. Because it has actually entered history the whole of Christian thought and action can no longer be conceived in terms of idealism. The Christian end remains the final end, but because that end has broken into time and yet transcends time he is conscious of it here and now.

III

In the last two generations, however, the whole picture has been decisively altered, and that has been due to two main factors: (1) The rising tide of evangelical witness which led to the great missionary movement of modern times has forced the Church in the home countries to think anew of the relation between the evangel and history, and evangel and the whole world. The actual task of the Gospel succeeded in throwing an urgency back into the Church's faith which the theologians and scholars had belittled and almost destroyed. (2) The historico-critical study of the Biblical documents with its increasing thoroughness brought scholars back to grapple with the enormous place occupied in them by eschatology. It is particularly with this movement that we are concerned here.

In the forefront of this return to the understanding of the eschatological character of the New Testament stand the names of Overbeck, Johannes Weiss, and Schweitzer, though the influence of the last-named has been most potent in this country. The " discovery " associated with these scholars was that all New Testament teaching is lodged within an eschatological scheme which gives to each doctrine its peculiar form. Or, to put it the other way round, the New Testament thought-world has a central point which gives its otherwise varied character an essential unity, so that the individual ideas and doctrines that come up fall within its orbit and have their deepest meaning in relation to its central point. This central point is declared to be a specially modified form of late Jewish apocalyptic eschatology. This means that, as against the uneschatological views of scholars like Harnack, the New Testament must be interpreted in a thorough-going eschatological fashion. And further, as late-Jewish apocalyptic eschatology was essentially futurist and catastrophic, we must regard the Kingdom of God in the Gospel as purely future and abruptly supernatural. Jesus, it is said, expected only an eschatological realization of the Kingdom, and therefore everything must be projected into the coming age.

Schweitzer's views have had enormous influence, particularly in destroying those reconstructions of the Gospel which chose to ignore the eschatological sayings of Jesus in an attempt to set Him forth as the central figure of the Kingdom of God on earth regarded primarily as a social and ethical movement in

history reaching out through human progress toward Utopia. But there can be no doubt that Schweitzer has overstated the case, and given a very one-sided account of the New Testament. He ignores almost entirely the element of teleology in the teaching of Jesus with its roots in the prophetic view of the Kingdom. At the same time it is simply not true that the teaching of Jesus has only a future reference, as C. H. Dodd has made magnificently clear, for there is constant insistence upon the fact that the Kingdom has come already, while throughout all there is a joyful sense of God's actual presence in Jesus Christ. He is the King of the Kingdom, and is here now to redeem and to save with the very finger of God. What is at stake ultimately in Schweitzer's view therefore is the doctrine of Christ, for a Jesus who is so utterly deluded as the figure of Schweiter's reconstruction, who dies with a despairing cry when events take an unforeseen course, cannot be the Son of God as the Church believes Him to be.

But behind all this it must be said that Schweitzer misunderstands the nature of eschatology itself which he thinks of only in a narrow apocalyptist sense. Indeed again and again it would appear that in eschatology Schweitzer sees little more than a primitive cosmology. When therefore he sets the Gospels in a thoroughly eschatological setting, that really means that it is set in the midst of an apocalyptic scenery which, as far as he can see, is bound up with unscientific views of the world. It is not surprising, therefore, that he rejects eschatology almost *in toto* as primitive mythology, nor surprising that, if his scholarship forces him to declare the New Testament to be eschatological from end to end, he should think of the story of the Church as the story of a progressive elimination of eschatology. Schweitzer himself carries that position to its ultimate conclusion which significantly ends in the trivial declaration of faith as simply reverence for life.

Schweitzer's interpretation of the New Testament was elaborated in opposition to the uneschatological views of Harnack, but it is now apparent that Schweitzer really failed because he operated with similar idealist and rationalist assumptions which prevented him from thinking through the eschatological message of the New Testament radically. In other words his essentially Hellenic presuppositions prevented him from apprehending the inner eschatological form of faith, apart from which apocalypse can only appear rather crude. For him therefore

the supreme problem which faces the Church, and has faced the Church throughout her long history, is a reinterpretation of the Gospel message that must be pivoted upon the *actual fact* that the Kingdom of God did not come in the first generation as the early Christians expected it would: *das Problem der ausgebliebenen Parusie*. Schweitzer has done a tremendous service to Biblical studies in calling attention to the eschatological nature of early Christian faith, but unfortunately by propounding this problem he has set the whole discussion off upon a false scent (cf. especially W. Michaelis, *Der Herr verzieht nicht die Verheissung*).

Most of the literature on eschatology of recent years has started from this problem, and has either gone on after taking the "actual fact" for granted or tried to explain it away. Schweitzer has had direct descendants to his views in Werner and Buri, who begin with the fact that the whole of the New Testament eschatology is bound up with a very definite historical situation which cannot be repeated, and who go on to restate the whole Christian position in such a way that it is no longer vitiated by the delusion of the near Advent of Christ, but theirs is a theology that runs out into the same trivialities in which very little that is vital of the original Gospel is left. On the other hand there has arisen a *timeless eschatology* which explains away in symbolical fashion the New Testament attitude to a future but imminent Advent of the Kingdom, and to this belong people so varied as the early Barth, Bultmann, Hoskyns, and Dodd, and many others. Apart from these, whose eschatological thought is closely bound up with New Testament scholarship, there are others who might conveniently be grouped into three categories.

(*a*) Behind all this discussion there has been a tradition that has maintained a close relation to the thought of the Reformation and has thought out the problems of Biblical theology that have been thrown up without losing the inner eschatological tension of faith that one finds in Calvin and Luther—the most notable and influential of these on the Continent was undoubtedly Martin Kähler, who in many ways is coming back into appreciation to-day, and in this country P. T. Forsyth and H. R. Mackintosh.

(*b*) At the same time there has been a movement among those who still operate within the idealist tradition to get to

grips with eschatology and to set it forth with a new understanding of what were called " values ". Into this group one might put Althaus, Von Hügel, and John Baillie, and to a certain extent Emil Brunner.

(*c*) Still a third group comprises those who have what is often called a more " naïve " attitude to time and to the Kingdom, a serious reinterpretation of the New Testament which received great impetus from the eschatological fervour of the elder Blumhardt, and the evangelical sects.

It is impossible to go into these various conceptions of eschatology here, though it is high time that most New Testament scholars paid more attention to the work of the theologians which has been going on parallel to that of Biblical studies.

(*To be continued*)

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