

Preaching, Eschatology, and World View

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For more than half a century, mainstream Protestant preaching in America has had little to do with themes related to future eschatology.¹ The idea of a coming eschaton, an end of history and a “new creation,” has been considered an untenable concept by most mainstream preachers since the 1920’s. The reasons for this are rooted in changes in world view that began early in the nineteenth century.

I

Postmillennialist preachers of the early nineteenth century envisioned a cataclysmic end to history after a millennium of “evangelical conquest” and “secular progress.”² Preachers evoked an expanding, inclusive vision of the worldwide progress of the kingdom of God on earth in which human beings cooperated as instruments of the kingdom, spreading the good news of the gospel until all the world would be encompassed.³ According to James H. Moorhead, “postmillennialism was a compromise between a progressive, evolutionary view of history and the apocalyptic outlook of Revelation.”⁴

In short, postmillennialism was an appropriate eschatology for an activist people who believed in the essential soundness of their civilization and who saw the future as an arena for its indefinite improvement and extension. Yet postmillennialism also preserved a hard residue of apocalypticism to which Protestants were committed by reason of their doctrine of the Bible and by virtue of a piety centered on conversion, death, and the choice of heaven or hell. The genius of postmillennialism lay in its symbolic integration of those diverse perspectives.⁵

In the late nineteenth century, the postmillennialist integration of biblical apocalyptic and an evolutionary world view began to disappear in much of Protestant preaching. Biblical criticism discredited traditional understandings of biblical apocalyptic. Under the influence of Albrecht Ritschl and other liberal theologians many Protestant preachers interpreted the Kingdom of God as an achievable ethical reality rather than a future eschatological event. Preachers abandoned the postmillennialist emphasis on the conversion of humanity. In its place they accented Christian nurture and social ethics.

Although liberal-evangelical preachers such as Harry Emerson Fosdick, George Buttrick, and William P. Merrill clung to remnants of postmillennialist rhetoric in their preaching, most liberal and social gospel preachers, by the 1920’s, envisioned the Kingdom of God as increasingly present in an evolving history, rather than as a final reign of God to be inaugurated in the future. According to Arthur Odell, pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church,

Detroit, in 1926:

. . . God's Kingdom keeps coming on earth like an everlasting dawn, as the glowing light of the 'righteousness that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.'"⁶

The growth of interdenominational fundamentalism and the premillennialist idea that Jesus might return at any moment sparked a reaction to eschatological themes among theological moderates as well as liberals.⁷ In order to avoid controversy and remain loyal to their denominations, many preachers chose to avoid eschatological themes altogether.

By the mid-twentieth century, after the sobering historical events of war, depression, Nazism, and Hiroshima, and under the theological influence of Niebuhrian neoorthodoxy, liberal optimism about the human ability to better the world was muted in much of mainstream Protestant preaching. Neo-orthodox preachers deflated the historical and social progressivism of both postmillennialist and liberal preaching and stressed heavily the qualitative difference between history and the eschatological future envisioned in the history of salvation found in Scripture.

Neoorthodox preaching in America failed to carry forward the task of generating a realistic historical vision that would motivate the church to become involved in new forms of historical activity. Perhaps this is because, like liberalism, Christian "realism" in the pulpit carried an undercurrent message of historical resignation. If liberal preaching ultimately invited the question "why should the future succeed any better than the present?"⁸ the anti-utopian "realism" of neoorthodox preaching communicated a conservative, measured pragmatism devoid of any imaginative historical vision, a pragmatism which might ultimately be interpreted as capitulation to the status quo.⁹ By the 1960's, the end result of the preaching of neoorthodoxy's critical "realism" in the mainstream Protestant churches was what Benton Johnson calls its "dour legacy," the "aura of pessimism, judgment and guilt."¹⁰

The social and psychological preaching of the 1960's and 1970's revived elements of the liberal ethical hope for the future. Preachers accentuated again the human responsibility for bringing God's future into being, not through conversion or through blind faith in the inevitable progress of history, but through commitment to personal and social healing and reconciliation. Again, however, the idea of an entirely *new* eschatological future, in discontinuity with the historical present, was out of the question for preaching. Preachers discerned God's future by observing latent possibilities within the current situation which might be actualized gradually in the community of faith and in the world.

In liberationist preaching which has begun to take root in some liberal Protestant denominations in North America, the neo-Marxist utopian hope of achieving liberation for the world's poor and socially marginalized peoples has been freed from the restrictions imposed upon it by theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr.¹¹ The liberal vision of the involvement of all people in God's progressive revelation and the betterment of the whole world has been altered in liberationist preaching with the message that the eschatological future will

be inaugurated by the "poor of God." It is through solidarity with the historical project of the liberation of the poor and dispossessed that the mainstream Protestant churches in America will participate in the advent of God's future.¹²

Although liberation theology contains a strong emphasis on the discontinuity between present reality and God's future and the priority of that future for interpreting the present situation, it has yet to be seen whether the North American preaching of liberation theology will be able to resist the residual progressivism of social gospel preaching. There is good reason to believe that in the North American context, liberationist preaching will fall back on the same kind of progressivist eschatology espoused by social gospel preachers in the early years of the twentieth century.¹³

II

It is the fundamental argument of those who distrust all forms of future eschatology that contemporary experience simply does not sustain the preaching and teaching of interventionist or "supernaturalist" views of the future. The uncritical supernaturalism or postmillennialist and premillennialist eschatologies is not possible in a modern scientific milieu. These eschatological systems are charged with "precritical biblicism and antiquated supernaturalism."¹⁴

The progressive, ethical eschatology of liberalism developed to meet the epistemology of the modern scientific world view in which the "visible" guided the interpretation of the "invisible," rather than vice versa.¹⁵ In other words, according to the "new science," knowledge of the future was only possible through observation of the present. The future of God's Kingdom could only be known as an outgrowth of observable realities in the current situation.

The popularization of this world view made it difficult to preach sermons about an invisible eschatological "future" to be inaugurated by God which might somehow guide the interpretation of the present. Such a message made no logical sense to the great majority of people in the pews of mainstream Protestant churches. For this reason, preachers who desired to bring the biblical message into a credible interaction with the prevailing scientific world view found it nearly impossible to preach any form of future eschatology. The only options were the optimistic progressivism of liberalism, or the sobered realism of Niebuhrian neoorthodoxy.

Although critical of the utopianism of liberalism, Niebuhrian neoorthodoxy originally represented the opposite side of the optimistic liberal accommodation to a modern scientific world view. Richard Fox points out the liberal underpinnings of Reinhold Niebuhr's entire theological project, noting that Niebuhr sought to appeal to the modern scientific skeptic, the "educated despiser" of religion rather than to the modern scientific optimist who was naively caught up in the liberal synthesis of theology and culture.¹⁶ In this way, Niebuhr conceived of an integration between theology and modern Western civilization rooted in a shared skeptical and ironic "realism" rather than in a shared progressivistic optimism.

In most instances the homiletical project of integrating theology and the

culture of modern science through a skeptical and ironic realism failed. Many neoorthodox preachers left this integrating project behind entirely. They conceived of their homiletical task as reactionary to the surrounding culture and spent most of their time attempting to "restore elements of the religious tradition lost during the liberal era."¹⁷

The progressivism of social gospel and liberal preachers and the skeptical realism of Niebuhrian neoorthodox preachers were more than adaptive maneuvers to make Christian theology more palatable to modern culture. They were also important vehicles for the *popularization* of the modern scientific world view. On the one hand, liberal and social gospel preachers spoke with confidence and excitement about the evolving character of history and revelation. On the other hand, neoorthodox preachers used the eschatological history of salvation to investigate with a critical realism the history of the world, marking off the limits of its potential for meaning and fulfillment. In each case, preachers looked carefully within the visible realities of present history to discover the observable patterns which would enable them to interpret with more insight the yet invisible future. They promoted the modern scientific world view by the way they interpreted Scripture, history, and human experience, and by the undercurrent conviction that modern science and Christian theology were not in fundamental opposition to each other, at least in their posture toward the unknown.

III

For nearly a hundred years, the modern scientific world view has been the primary world view of both the preacher and the person in the mainstream Protestant pew on Sunday morning. In a summary of Thomas F. Torrance's contribution to the theology-natural science integration, Walter J. Neidhardt, physicist at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, observed recently that "for the typical man or woman 'on the street' natural science is made possible by its practitioners using 'visible' observational patterns to guide them toward a greater understanding of the 'invisible' patterns which give reality its diverse structure."¹⁸

What most parishioners and preachers are perhaps only beginning to realize is that the view of natural science has been significantly revised in the past thirty years, especially in the field of physics. Philosophers and historians of science like Michael Polanyi, Thomas Kuhn and others have pointed out that "great scientists have made their discoveries through an imaginative postulation of 'invisible' hidden patterns which explain the 'visible' observational patterns."¹⁹ Garrett Green, in his recent study of theology and the religious imagination notes the "unpicturability" of recent scientific theories which postulate the existence of invisible entities like neutrinos, or which attribute properties of both waves and particles to certain subatomic entities in order to account for their behavior, properties which "cannot be harmonized in any picturable manner."²⁰

According to Green, postmodern science and theology are similar in their fundamental epistemology. This epistemology is *imaginative* at its root. The

word imaginative does not mean “imaginary,” though it includes the realm of the “fictive” in its total scope of activity. Imagination is “the means by which we are able to represent anything not directly accessible, including both the world of the imaginary and recalcitrant aspects of the real world: it is the medium of fiction as well as of fact.”²¹ The scientific and religious imagination generates what Kuhn calls “paradigms” or “construct-paradigms” which operate as analogies to “induce a ‘new way of seeing.’”²² Furthermore, as in the case of Newtonian physics, these paradigms “may not even be fully accurate in the light of subsequent developments.”²³ For this reason, from time to time, there are “paradigm disputes” in which the errors in one paradigm are exposed and a new one emerges.

According to Green, “the realistic imagination thus depends entirely on paradigms to gain access to the ‘transcendent,’ taken here in its literal sense as the ‘world beyond’—any aspect of reality outside the ‘mesocosm’ of familiar experience.”²⁴ Properly understood, in both science and theology, imagination is “the taking of paradigms to explore the patterns of the larger world.”²⁵ Such “paradigm-taking” is done in relation to *spatial* objects, like subatomic particles, *logical* objects, like “the soul” or “Satan,” and *temporal* objects like “the ice age” or “the millennium” or “the Kingdom of God.”²⁶ In every instance, whether scientific or theological, a paradigm is generated which will enable the user to gain access to a reality transcendent to familiar experience.

There is little awareness in the churches, and only cultic and syncretistic awareness in the broader culture²⁷ that science and theology are exploring a new kind of integration in a shared heuristic imagination. After nearly thirty years of conceptual fine-tuning, this intergration may have the potential to displace the progressivist integration of liberalism and the skepticist integration of neoorthodoxy. Most churches and the vast majority of our culture, however, remain in what Green calls a “mesocosmic parochialism” which narrows theological and cultural attention “to those aspects of reality that can be visualized in terms of Newtonian space and time,” and promotes the “corresponding illusion that anything requiring imagination must be imaginary.”²⁸

IV

Several important questions emerge for the preacher in considering the relationship between the pulpit and the “mesocosmic parochialism” of the church and surrounding culture. First, is it possible that the world view of post modern science will reach the popular level any time in the near future? Second, should preaching have a role in the popularization of this world view and how should this be done? Third, is it possible that as recent science is popularized and begins to significantly affect world views it will be possible to preach again a kind of future eschatology—one which is imaginative, but not imaginary, an “unpicturable” reality that would give meaning to present history and provoke new understanding and motivation for the postmodern church? And finally, what should the thematic contours of this eschatology be for preaching?

With regard to these questions several preliminary observations might be made. First, although the process is slow, the popularization of postmodern

science is already well underway. The American Scientific Affiliation lists 480 books currently in print on subjects pertinent to the relationship between science, theology, and culture in its 1988-1989 *Source Book*.²⁹ Programs such as "Nova" explore the mysteries of the universe on prime time television in many parts of the country. Mall bookstores are filled with science fiction novels which make fictional use of the insights of modern physics.³⁰ Magazines such as *Scientific American* also disseminate the lessons of modern physics to lay persons.³¹ Eastern mystical and "New Age" teachings, some of which have found their way into mainstream churches, are popularizing a syncretistic and uncritical understanding of physics as "a view of the world which is very similar to the views held by mystics of all ages and traditions."³²

Whether preaching can help *but* have a role in the popularization of this world view is debatable. Preaching is highly responsive to the dominant culture. Even in a reactionary stance, preaching educates parishioners about the "evils" of the culture and thus about its world view. For the preacher who adopts an interactive relationship to that culture there is the need to be informed and critical.

An informed and critical homiletic will take note that the fundamental relationship that is to be drawn between theology and postmodern science is not in terms of *content* but in terms of *method*. In other words, the best analogies between theology and the new physics are epistemological, not ontological or existential. Attempts to draw out analogies at the level of "the unity and interrelatedness of all things,"³³ or the "paradoxical nature of reality"³⁴ in both science and theology might promote a confusing syncretism which is misleading. What preaching can do, however, is to show by example and by content that theology and postmodern science are analogous as imaginative and "paradigm-taking" in their way of knowing. This will begin to overcome the naive progressivism and the hard skepticism of the older scientific world view and open congregations up to a "realistic imaginative"³⁵ way of knowing God and the world in which they live.

As congregations and preachers begin to explore this realistic imaginative way of knowing, the *temporal* "paradigm-taking" enterprise of future eschatology might be reopened as a part of the preacher's agenda. Rather than stressing the continuity between history and the eschatological future as in liberal preaching, or overstressing the qualitative difference between history and the eschatological future as in neoorthodox preaching, the preacher would start with the eschatological future (the invisible) as "something qualitatively different and new" and then note how that future, as "the future of this particular historical reality," "puts its stamp on the way history is experienced and moulded here, in the present,"³⁶ (the visible). In the words of Jürgen Moltmann, the future becomes a "new paradigm of transcendence" which would "give the experiment 'history' meaning."³⁷ Such meaning is absolutely vital for the postmodern church suffering under the implicit resignation of liberalist and neoorthodox eschatologies.

It is the homiletical task to work out the contours of this eschatology in such a way that it meets constructively the emerging world view of postmodern science. This is the preacher's role as theologian at the intersection of

theology and culture. Moltmann is correct, however, that the heart of the “new paradigm of transcendence” is Jesus Christ. The preacher sees that in Christ, the “qualitatively new future is present under the conditions of history.”³⁸ The “new creation,” a discontinuous, invisible reality, the “end of history” or “eschaton,” is present and visible in the midst of history in the person and work of Jesus Christ, providing the preacher with a pool of eschatological symbols from which to preach.

The hermeneutical strategy for approaching Jesus Christ involves the preacher in *temporal* “paradigm-taking.” The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are interpreted by the preacher *eschatologically* rather than metaphysically or existentially. An eschatological “realistic imaginative” preaching of Christ interprets these events as the primary symbols constituting a new paradigm of *temporal* transcendence. Like the creative physicists, the homiletician explores this paradigm in order to enable the church to gain access to *reality* beyond the “mesocosm” of familiar experience, reality that might produce meaning, hope, and the motivation for action and further discovery in the present.

Several eschatological themes for preaching begin to emerge in this kind of homiletical venture. The foremost among these is the theme of the provisional or “experimental” nature of all historical manifestations of the Christian faith and secular culture. After all, it is the profound experience of this “provisionality” which impels those in both theology and science to develop their realistic imaginations. Second, there is the critical theme of the suspicion of progressivism as it manifests itself in utopian eschatologies and in dialectical and technological concepts of development. As Moltmann points out, the crucified Jesus at the heart of the Christian paradigm of the future points to the ever-present fact that all such notions of the future ultimately exclude, neglect, and oppress those who fail to “progress” according to the established plan.³⁹ Finally, there is the thematic linking of faith with hope and history (in that order), where hope for the new future in Christ begins again to control how Christians believe, think, and act in the historical present.

NOTES

This essay was written in memory of Dr. Harold Nebelsick, Professor of Doctrinal Theology at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary from 1968 until his death on Easter Sunday, 1989. Harold was a good friend and colleague whose reflections concerning the integration of theology and science inspired much of what is written here.

¹ By “mainstream” is meant those “establishment” churches defined by Dorothy C. Bass as including the “Presbyterian, Congregational, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Northern Baptist churches together with the Disciples of Christ and some Lutheran bodies. . . .” *Teaching with Authority? The Changing Place of Mainstream Protestantism in American Culture*, prepared for The Council on Theological Education, Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Nov. 5, 1986, 4. My observation about the preaching of future eschatology is based on a survey of sermons I recently conducted as part of a research project on the history of Presbyterian preaching in America in the twentieth century. My research was part of a larger study of the Presbyterian church as a case study of mainstream Protestantism being conducted over the past two years by a number of scholars on a grant by the Lilly foundation. Essays from this larger study will be published in a set of forthcoming books edited by John Mulder, Louis Weeks, and Milton J. Coalter.

² James H. Moorhead, “The Erosion of Postmillennialism in American Religious Thought,

1865 1925 *Church History* 5 (1984) 62 (hereafter cited as 'Erosion')

¹ James H. Moorhead, 'Between Progress and Apocalypse: A Reassessment of Millennialism in American Religious Thought, 1800-1880,' *The Journal of American History* 71 (December 1984) 529 (hereafter cited as "Between Progress and Apocalypse")

⁴ Moorhead, "Erosion," 61

⁵ Moorhead, "Between Progress and Apocalypse," 541

⁶ "Keeping the Prophet Alive," in *Preachers and Preaching in Detroit*, ed. Ralph Milton Pierce (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1926), 168

⁷ Lefferts Loetscher, *The Broadening Church* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954), 91

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Future of Creation: Collected Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 15-16 (hereafter cited as *The Future of Creation*)

⁹ Roger L. Shinn, "Realism, Radicalism, and Eschatology in Reinhold Niebuhr: A Reassessment," *Journal of Religion* 54 (1974) 415. Although powerless to stop this from happening, Niebuhr was concerned that his anti-utopianism might engender a loss of vision that would weaken the church's ethic. Roger Shinn notes that "utopia was not public enemy number 1 for Niebuhr. A greater enemy was a Christian orthodoxy that was socially impotent" (420). Niebuhr himself wrote "I would prefer to work with the superficial believers in utopia rather than ally myself with a kind of theological profundity which falsifies the immediate situation" (419).

¹⁰ Benton Johnson, "Taking Stock: Reflections on the End of Another Era," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21 (1982) 194-195 (hereafter cited as "Taking Stock")

¹¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribners, 1951), 2:160

¹² Justo L. Gonzalez and Catherine Gunsalus Gonzalez, *Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 26-28

¹³ T. Howland Sanks, "Liberation Theology and the Social Gospel: Variations on a Theme," *Theological Studies* 41, (1980) 672-673

¹⁴ Moorhead, "Erosion," 77

¹⁵ Walter J. Neidhardt, "Thomas F. Torrance's Integration of Judeo-Christian Theology and Natural Science: Some Key Themes," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* (June 1989) 91-92 (hereafter cited as "Torrance's Integration")

¹⁶ Richard W. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 183

¹⁷ Johnson, "Taking Stock," 192

¹⁸ Neidhardt, "Torrance's Integration," 92

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 75 (hereafter cited as *Imagining God*)

²¹ Green, *Imagining God*, 66

²² Ibid., 68

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 69

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Green, *Imagining God*, 64. Similarly, Thomas F. Torrance takes note that it is a basic, epistemological principle of theology and natural science that the genuinely unique and novel (for instance, the nonclassical behavior of quantum "objects" or the resurrection of Jesus Christ) must always be interpreted in conceptual terms appropriate to that newness. Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 126, 127, 138, 335-336.

²⁷ See Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (New York: Bantam, 1977), and Russell Chandler, *Understanding the New Age* (Dallas: Word, 1988) (hereafter cited as *The Tao of Physics* and *Understanding the New Age*)

²⁸ *Imagining God*, 77

²⁹ American Scientific Affiliation, P. O. Box 668, Ipswich, Massachusetts, 01938

³⁰ Richard Morris, in his book *Dismantling the Universe* (New York: Touchstone, 1984), 45-61, examines the relationship and nonrelationship between much of science fiction and science (hereafter cited as *Dismantling*)

³¹ See *Particles and Fields: Readings from Scientific American* (San Francisco: Freeman,

1980).

³² Morris, *Dismantling*, 157. See also, Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, Gary Zukov, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (New York: Morrow, 1979), and chapter 22 of Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, entitled "Religion and Churches."

³³ quoted from *The Tao of Physics* in *Dismantling*, 160.

³⁴ Morris, *Dismantling*, 163.

³⁵ Green, *Imagining God*, 69.

³⁶ Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*, 15-16.

³⁷ Ibid., 15.

³⁸ Ibid., 16-17.

³⁹ Ibid., 58.