

When Our Myths Are Shattered: A Constructive Critique of Apocalyptic Theology

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In *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris reflects on what she calls “scary stuff”—the literature of apocalypse:

It is not a detailed prediction of the future, or an invitation to withdraw from the concerns of this world. It is a wake-up call, one that uses intensely poetic language and imagery to sharpen our awareness of God’s presence in and promise for the world.... For some reason we human beings seem to learn best how to love when we’re a bit broken, when our plans fall apart, when our myths of self-sufficiency and goodness and safety are shattered.... The apocalyptic vision is meant to give us the hope that, despite considerable evidence to the contrary, in the end it is good that will prevail.¹

Last summer, questions about the “scary stuff” became very real to me. A retired trial lawyer and I were in a johnboat fishing for bream when he began to ask me a series of questions about the Second Coming and the Rapture. These questions caught me completely off guard. Where did his questions come from? He had just read *Left Behind* by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. At the time I had not even heard of the book or the series that followed, now into its seventh volume. I was surprised that he was reading such a book, and even more surprised at how interesting he found it. Later I discovered that my doctor was reading the same book with similar interest.

The phenomenal sales of the *Left Behind* series indicate how widespread is the American fascination with apocalyptic. A recent volume, *The Indwelling*, (the seventh of a projected twelve) made the *New York Times* bestseller list the first Sunday after it was released. The film version of *Left Behind* was released earlier this year. Whatever we may think of the “pop apocalypticism” of ones like LaHaye and Lindsey (*The Late, Great Planet Earth*), it clearly is impacting the faith of our church members. The language and concepts of pre-millennial apocalypticism have become so commonplace that many assume they are “the biblical view” of the future. We who hold to a different view of the promises and purposes of God cannot let that assumption go unchallenged. But first we must seek to understand better the appeal of the apocalyptic theology many of us find strange or even offensive.

What is the appeal of apocalypticism? Aside from its trendiness and aggressive marketing, a significant part of its appeal is that it seems to offer a biblical-theological framework within which to make sense of the most threatening possibilities of our time. Through the extensive use of “Bible prophecy,” believers are assured that God is still in control, and God (and they!) will be triumphant. In his excellent study on “Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture,” Paul Boyer writes,

Prophecy belief is a way of ordering experience. It gives a grand,

overarching shape to history, and thus ultimate meaning to the lives of individuals caught up in history's stream. Here I believe is the key to its enduring appeal.²

From a Reformed theological perspective, however, the way in which the current apocalypticism offers meaning and assurance to believers needs to be challenged. Three areas of concern warrant further exploration.

The way in which God's determination of future destruction is understood tends toward a *dangerous fatalism*. If the world is inexorably destined for destruction by God, why be concerned about it? In the words of Jürgen Moltmann, "Nothing has a more fatal effect than the expectation of a fatal future."³

Similarly, the emphasis on the "Rapture" of believers in popular apocalypticism tends toward *escapism*. The hope offered in "the Rapture" is essentially a selfish hope for the escape of Christians from the world, not the redemption of the world. It is thus a false hope that avoids the "cost of discipleship" by assuring Christians that they will not be around to undergo the "great tribulation." Such an assurance is directly contrary to the New Testament's insistence that Christians are called to share the sufferings of Christ in the world.

Closely related to escapism and fatalism is the way in which apocalypticism may hide a significant measure of *despair* under the cover of faith. In articulating a Christian vision of hope, an important distinction must be made between acknowledging the reality, power, and persistence of evil and giving in to despair in the face of it. Such despair is entirely contrary to the biblical witness of prophets and apostles. It is a false reading of the headlines of evil that fails to account for the often hidden but effective providence of God, and thus goes against the very grain of scripture and the dominant Christian moral traditions.

Apocalypticism can serve to remind us forcefully that we do not and cannot "save the world" by our own efforts. But that does not mean that the Creator and Lord of the universe does not want, expect, and intend for us to do all we can to avoid the evils and catastrophes that are within our power. To the extent that any particular expression of apocalypticism leads to escape from the demands of faithful living, passivity, or despair in the face of evil, it must be judged as a failure to represent the fullness of biblical hope and a denial of our stewardship of the created order.

A Theological Critique of Apocalypticism

Biblical prophecy is misunderstood when it is viewed predominantly as a prediction of the future rather than as a proclaiming of the present and ultimate will of God. The Bible is not a book of secret codes or hidden prophecies that only we today can properly decipher. Furthermore, Jesus did not use threats of "the End" to scare people into faith. He did not promise the "Rapture of the Church," nor did he counsel despair in the face of historical evils. In fact, he did just the opposite. "In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Apocalyptic scenarios of the destruction of the world do not do justice to the significance of God's original creation. In apocalyptic thought, the world is often seen as so irredeemably evil that it can only be destroyed. The question must be asked: Does the messianic kingdom and the "new heaven and new earth" to which scripture points involve the destruction of the old creation or its redemption and transformation? While

the apocalyptic vision can save us from a facile optimism in the face of the radical persistence of evil, it fails to offer a compelling account as to why God created a universe doomed merely for extinction. A more thoroughly biblical vision of hope must account for the ongoing value of the creation God calls into being in overflowing love, declares to be good, and promises to redeem.

It must be asked: Is the only power God has over evil in history the power to destroy it? Is not God's sovereign love in Christ powerful enough to transform and redeem sinful humanity? In the poetics of biblical apocalyptic, evil is "burned up" by God forever. But God does not treat the goodness of the created order as if it were meaningless. The biblical hope is for "a new heaven and a new earth." How to do justice both to the continuity and the discontinuity with the original creation is one of the great challenges to Christian eschatology. By all scientific accounts life on this planet is eventually doomed to extinction. Yet we are promised in scripture—and in faith cling to the assurance—that in the new creation all that is good in the original creation will be preserved and transformed, and all that has marred its created goodness will be destroyed. With God there is "no lost good." In Revelation 22, the images of the nations bringing their wealth into the redeemed City symbolize continuity with the first creation. Yet there is also redemptive discontinuity, for "Death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4b). In a universe destined for destruction, our hope must deal with the reality of death without devaluing the goodness of creation and life in it.

In much apocalyptic thought a too sharp and dangerous division is made between the righteous and the unrighteous. Much of the appeal of apocalyptic theology is in its assurance that God is on "our side." Yet to divide the world so sharply into the righteous and the wicked does not do justice to the complexity of goodness/evil in all of us. To identify some persons or groups as "the enemies of God" invites, and too often justifies, violence against them. It is understandable that oppressed religious groups would tend to identify their enemies with the enemies of God, but it is no less dangerous for being understood. Over against a too easy assumption that our enemies are God's enemies is the persistent biblical reminder that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." The persistence of sin in the lives of the redeemed is both a biblical and an empirical reality we dare not forget, lest the "righteous" be guilty of the worst evils of all.

Thus, apocalyptic fervor needs to be tempered by self-critical reflection. The question is whether it is possible. In a helpful article on "the pastoral implications of apocalyptic," Ellen Charry sees apocalypticism as a "two-edged sword."

...the pastoral function of apocalyptic is twofold...to bolster the faithful in their precarious situation and to hold their feet to the fire.... Apocalyptic encourages endurance in times of crisis and concedes to panic when the End seems near. It is a cry for succor and rescue when human resources seem unable to stem the coming tide of evil and destruction, yet it thrives on moral outrage that burns out when the crisis passes.... It can be dangerous when it breeds self-righteous indignation. Yet, without it and the hope that it nourishes, the Christian project would collapse.⁴

An issue for apocalyptic theology is how to engender and encourage self-critical reflection without losing the sense of assurance that gives it its greatest appeal and power.

Learning from Contemporary Expressions of Apocalypticism

What do we learn from contemporary expressions of apocalypticism? We learn that people have a tremendous hunger for a sense of meaning and purpose grounded in God. The spiritual emptiness of the modern world portrayed in the dominant media and experienced in secular culture is everywhere evident. We cannot live without a deeper sense of meaning and purpose than any form of materialism offers. In particular, scientism and technology cannot provide the overarching and undergirding meta-narrative that could order our exponential increase of knowledge into a coherent whole. As pastor-theologians we have a vital role to play in enabling people to appropriate for themselves the great master story, the “transcendent narrative,” rendered in the Bible. The great story of the promises and purposes of God gives meaning to the stories of our lives and the universe.

We learn that people long for authentic hope—and long for it so desperately that they will accept almost anything that seems to offer hope and meaning in the midst of events that threaten to overwhelm them. What is offered in the popular apocalypticism of today is a counterfeit hope. But the fact that it is so attractive indicates that we have failed to present a biblical view of hope that is able to grasp people’s attention, move their hearts, and motivate their actions. We must find compelling ways to affirm the triumph of God’s love in Jesus Christ so as to articulate a biblical vision of hope that points not to the destruction of creation but to its ultimate transformation and redemption.

We learn that we have a great deal of work to do in understanding better the whole of God’s revelation in scripture. A large part of the appeal of the popular apocalypticism is that it appears to be biblical. As pastor-theologians we need to help our people understand how various forms and styles of literature in scripture are best interpreted in accord with the “rules of engagement” for understanding each particular literary form. In helping people understand better the genre of apocalyptic literature, we can show how its symbols function effectively to engender and sustain hope apart from “prophetic timetables.”

We learn that we need to articulate a more compelling vision of biblical hope that takes seriously the goodness of creation, God’s liberating work in history and beyond it, and the biblical promises of the redemption of all things in Christ. Since theology, like nature, abhors a vacuum, it should not surprise us that the “eschatological vacuum” in the mainline churches has been filled with all kinds of apocalyptic hot air. People are hungry as never before for a faith-full and hope-full articulation of the Goal for which all things were made and toward which by the sovereign love of God all things are moving.

A Vision of Hope

What might such a vision of hope look like? It will be based on the *promises of God*, not on our predictions or scenarios of the future. The difference is subtle but deeply significant. Adherents of “Bible prophecy” will argue that their prophetic scenarios are indeed the revealed promises of God. And yet there is a strong tendency

to rely more on the predicted scenarios of the future than on the One behind them “whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts.” Everything that really matters hangs on the faithfulness of the God who promises a new creation, not our cleverness in deciphering “prophetic texts.”

Christian hope is not based on predictions of the future, but on trust in the surprisingly sovereign God of Exodus and Easter who has called and claimed us as God’s own and who will not abandon us in life or death. Our hope is not grounded in a system of doctrine, however biblical it may claim to be, but in the commitment to creation and the human enterprise within it of the One who has promised to “make all things new,” and who has already begun that renewal in small, but far from insignificant ways, in our own lives and in the life of the world.

It will be a *modest hope* that does not seek to know more than what God has chosen to reveal to us. It will not ignore scripture’s own clear warning that it is not for us to “know the times or seasons” of the End time. Jesus says plainly that “the day and hour” of the End is revealed to no one, not even the Son, but to the Father only. Reinhold Niebuhr was right in warning Christians not to attempt to say too much “about the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell.” We hope for more than we have yet experienced based on our trust in the faithfulness of God.

It will be a *Christ-centered hope* that is shaped by the gospel narratives of his life, death, and resurrection, not by highly subjective interpretations of apocalyptic images. Death for us as individuals and for the universe as a whole is the ultimate limit of any hope not grounded in the sovereign Creator and Lord of life. Christian hope is essentially hope in the resurrection—the resurrection of Jesus, of all who are incorporated into his resurrection life, and of the universe that ultimately will be “set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:21).

This Christ-centered hope is based not on our wishful thinking or apocalyptic fantasies but on what God has already done in Jesus Christ and is already doing in our lives. We discern the outline of the future by tracing the promises of a faithful God through scripture and into our own lives today. What God has done and is doing keeps our hope grounded in the realities of redemption. And because that redemption is incomplete in all of us, it keeps us straining forward for that which we can see and greet only from afar, the “city whose builder and maker is God.”

It will be a hope that takes the *reality of death seriously*, but takes even more seriously God’s lordship over death. The traditional understanding of the “immortality of the soul,” still prevalent today, serves, often unwittingly, to deny the stark reality of death, and thus tends to devalue the preciousness of bodily, physical life in this world. Yet scripture attributes immortality to God alone and nowhere ignores or disguises the reality of death. Death is real and to all human perceptions and powers, final. But beyond the final frontier of death is the all-encompassing love of God, “the Father Almighty,” who in the resurrection of the beloved Son enacts and demonstrates God’s promise to maintain relationship with all on whom God has set eternal love.

It will be a hope for the *transformation and renewal of the whole creation*, not merely the salvaging of human “souls.” The biblical hope is for “a new heaven and new earth,” for creation renewed, not destroyed. The emphasis in scripture and creeds on the “resurrection of the body” can save Christian hope from a gnostic flight from the material and into a deeper appreciation for God’s will and power to redeem the whole

created order. We do not have language by which to describe such a transformation. We can no more fully conceive of the world to come than an unborn child in the womb can envision life in this world. What we have are rich, inspired metaphors of banquets and garden-cities and age-old enmities reconciled as lions lie down with lambs and snakes no longer bite. To the list of metaphors from the Old Testament, Paul adds his own in 1 Corinthians 15—the image of a seed that germinates in a surprising way. Just as a hard, black watermelon seed is vastly different from the plump, juicy melon that comes from it and yet is organically related to it, so in the resurrection of the dead the new embodiment that comes from God is vastly different from the body that has died and yet is still the same personal reality. For Christian hope, the essential emphasis is on a renewed embodiment in which to love and be loved eternally.

It will be a hope that *leads to action* in the present, not to despair or resignation. If visions of apocalyptic destruction tend toward resignation in the face of historical evils, the biblical vision of the “new creation” and the reconciliation of all things in Christ can and does lead to constructive action in the present, even in situations which humanly speaking appear hopeless. Hope in the triumph of God’s love in Jesus Christ empowers Christians to bear witness in the present to the future that is promised. In that task liturgy and social action are inseparably joined as the adumbration and celebration of the promised reign of Christ.

It will be a *lyrical hope* that can and must be sung. Walter Brueggemann, among others, has pointed to the “lyrical pluralism of hope” found in scripture. Biblical hope is not rooted in prophetic scenarios or apocalyptic timetables. It centers in the triune God whose powerful promises are remembered with gratitude, embraced in faith, and affirmed in hope-full action. Authentic hope is thus better sung than argued.

The best contemporary expression of Christian hope of which I am aware that meets the criteria above is found in “A Declaration of Faith,” written in the late 1970’s by a committee of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. Chapter Ten, “Christian Hope,” is a model for a biblically faithful vision of Christian hope that can serve well the needs of our time. In the mid-1980s Dr. Virgil Hale, the choir director with whom I worked at The Presbyterian Church of Bowling Green, Kentucky, set the entire chapter to music. It was a powerful and moving cantata of Christian hope.

Questions raised in johnboats, Sunday school classes, at dinner parties, and in casual conversations make it clear that we in the mainline denominations have failed to address adequately the issues raised by apocalypticism. If we do not or cannot provide a more compelling vision of Christian hope and a more meaningful theological framework within which to make sense of life, death, and destiny, we should not be surprised if people go elsewhere to find help in meeting those needs. Thus, we have serious theological work to do. The rich biblical images of hope, when taken seriously and articulated faithfully, can and do provide the sense of meaning and purpose to the human drama in creation without which human life loses its coherence. Our task as pastor-theologians is to articulate, celebrate, and live out as faithfully, as by God’s grace we can, the eternal hope that is ours in Christ, who makes “all things new.”⁵

Notes

¹Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 318-321.

²Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University,

1992), xi. This is the best historical study of “prophecy belief” that I know of. Boyer has read widely the prophetic literature, especially that which has been produced since 1945 when the dropping of the atom bomb ushered in a new era in apocalyptic thought.

³Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 203.

⁴Ellen Charry, “A Sharp Two-Edged Sword—Pastoral Implications of Apocalyptic,” *Interpretation* 53 (1999): 160, 169-170, 171.

⁵This article is an abbreviated version of an essay I wrote for the Pastor-Theologian Program of the Center of Theological Inquiry.