

# *Imagine There's No Heaven: The Loss of Eschatology in American Preaching\**

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There are two types of music—good and bad—and you can tell them apart by listening. *Duke Ellington*

The comedian George Carlin, in one of his marvelous standup routines, expresses astonishment over those opinion polls on television networks like CNN and Fox, where some debatable question is posed and people are invited to phone in and vote their views. “Did you ever notice,” Carlin says, “there’s always, like, 18 percent who vote ‘I don’t know’? It costs a dollar to make those calls,” Carlin says, “and they’re voting ‘I don’t know.’” Carlin imagines some guy seeing the question of the day on the TV screen and saying to his wife, “Honey, give me that phone!” He shouts “I don’t know!” into the phone and then says proudly to his wife, “Sometimes you have to stand up for what you believe you’re not sure about.” Carlin goes on to speculate that these same people probably call 1-900 numbers for \$3.00 a minute to say, “I’m not in the mood.”

Suppose, however, that there were a preachers’ version of these phone polls, and the question of the day was “What do you think about eschatology? What are your views on the specific shape and character of Christian hope for the future? What do you make of the New Testament’s promise that ‘the Son of Man will come in the clouds with great power and glory’?” Most preachers would probably vote “I don’t know.” And as for actually preaching a sermon on the theme of eschatology? Well, “I’m not in the mood.”

## *The Loss of an Eschatological Voice*

How today’s pulpit grew reticent about eschatology, about the classic “last things,” is a complex story, but it is also a remarkable story, because we who preach today are the heirs of preachers in a not-too-distant past who spoke often, clearly, and confidently of the Christian hope for people and for of all of creation. The children of Presbyterian clergyman Lyman Beecher, for example, remembered vividly that he prayed every day, “Overturn and overturn till He whose right it is shall come and reign, King of nations and King of saints.” Among educated clergy in the churches we have come to call “mainline,” the language of heaven, hell, Christ’s coming reign, and the final judgment were recurring and important topics of sermons in the nineteenth century, but by the close of the twentieth century a veil of embarrassment had been thrown over the whole matter. Preachers in 1850 spoke eloquently and frequently about the consummation of history in the return of Jesus Christ and of the pilgrimage of the soul toward eternal life, but they would have blushed at the mention of sex.

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Today, many preachers are willing to discuss life's fleshier problems with the frankness of Jerry Springer, but the prospect of preaching a sermon on the Second Coming or Judgment Day chills the blood.

A number of years ago, a reader of the official denominational magazine of the United Church of Christ and the United Presbyterian Church sent this no-doubt earnest query to the question-answer column: Q. Why are there so few sermons in our churches on the Second Coming? Is this part of our belief or not? The wise "answer person" replied this way:

A. Not all Christians think alike on matters of theology, but it would be hard for someone to feel at home in our tradition who did not understand God as the One who has come, who is present...in our lives today, *and* who is yet to come in whatever form the future ends up taking. To literalize the Second Coming is to ruin both its beauty and its significance. To ignore it is to avoid what may be the most important part of the Gospel we know about since the past and present, relatively speaking, are brief, while tomorrow borders on forever.<sup>1</sup>

In a later issue of the magazine, another reader reacted to this answer:

I compliment the Rev. \_\_\_\_\_ for his illusive non-answer to what I am sure was a serious question concerning the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. If I understood his answer, he said, in effect, "We don't all agree. But if you want to be comfortable in the UCC/UPC, you will need to agree that Jesus is coming again, but not really – for if you actually believe in the Second Coming you will ruin both its beauty and its significance. Yet you can't ignore it because it is in the future."<sup>2</sup>

Like this later correspondent, we may wince at the confused gobbledygook of the editor's answer to the original question, but most of us recognize in ourselves the same tendency to sand down the jagged, offending surfaces of eschatology. Whenever we enter the apocalyptic and eschatological territories of the Bible, we suddenly become disoriented tourists who don't know the language, who stumble over the customs, who are made queasy by the diet, and who can't find our way back to the hotel. What do you think about eschatology? I don't know. What about a sermon on the Last Things? I'm not in the mood.

What has happened to American preaching in the last one hundred years to cause the trumpet to lose its certain sound on eschatology?

The story, as I read it, is that nineteenth-century Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Methodist, Episcopal, Baptist, and other clergy in the American Protestant mainstream (mostly in the North) married themselves to a form of eschatological thinking that was finally conflicted internally, ham-handed in terms of biblical hermeneutics, and notably ill-equipped to withstand the hurricane winds of social and intellectual change that swept over the American religious landscape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We are still walking around, stunned, in the dust and ash of its collapse.

American church historian James Moorhead has persuasively described how a

wide swath of educated clergy in the mid-nineteenth century held firmly to a version of eschatology known as postmillennialism. This view of the course and consummation of history was actually a rather ingenious attempt to combine stout loyalty to the Bible, on the one hand, with an equally strong and optimistic commitment to social gradualism, on the other,<sup>3</sup> and it was described by a contemporary as “the commonly received opinion” of the day.<sup>4</sup>

From the Bible came an apocalyptic view of time, complete with the full pyrotechnics of trumpet blowing angels, howling winds, stars falling from the heavens, “the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory,” and all the nations gathered before the throne to be divided into the sheep and the goats. Their strict, mostly literal view of the Bible forced postmillennialists to take with utmost seriousness the biblical images of the Second Coming, of the ultimate cataclysmic denouement of history, and of death as the personal moment of standing in the breach between heaven and hell. Make no mistake about it, postmillennialists believed that one day “this old world was gonna reel and rock,” and their brand of eschatology had, as Moorhead says, a “hard residue of apocalypticism.”<sup>5</sup>

On the other side, though, from the social and philosophical *Zeitgeist* came an evolutionary view of history, moving ever onward up the ramp of progress. Postmillennialists were mostly educated and thoughtful denizens of their age who drank freely and deeply from the wells of developmental philosophy. History may be moving toward an omega point, they thought, but it was not blindly stumbling toward Armageddon. It was rather unfolding, evolving, and progressing toward the time when Christ would be all in all, and human beings had a role to play in this grand redevelopment project. The postmillennialists were, after all *post*-millennial. The shaking of the world’s foundations was surely coming, but not yet, not soon. These events would occur only after a millennium of social and moral progress, an extensive span of time in which Christ and his people were at work in the world gradually nurturing and developing society toward the ultimate kingdom. “[T]his was an effort,” Moorhead says, “to maintain a sense of the End while keeping it at a seemly distance.”<sup>6</sup>

We have to admire their achievement. Apocalypticism and social developmentalism are odd bedfellows to be sure, and only the most heroic expenditure of energy and intellectual capital could keep their relationship from ending up in divorce court. As biblical scholar John Barton has noted, apocalyptic poetry and historical prose are usually not commensurate. When Scripture says, “The stars will fall from heaven and the sun will cease its shining; the moon will be turned to blood and fire mingled with hail will fall from the heavens,” we don’t expect the next phrase to be “the rest of the country will be partly cloudy with scattered showers.”<sup>7</sup>

What postmillennialism generated was a kinder and gentler eschatology than the alternative strain: premillennialism. Premillennialists, who barked their fearful theology mainly from the fringes, held to a Halloween nightmare view of the end of time. Human history was a soiled failure of sinful rebellion, and a Christ with wrathful, burning eyes was coming with his terrible swift sword at any minute to clean house and rescue his tiny righteous remnant. Mainstream Protestants, however, were far more relaxed. They had one thousand years, a whole millennium, to do what Protestants do best: toil like worker bees Christianizing the nation, evangelizing the world, improving society, and otherwise efficiently engineering countless institutions after the pattern of Christ. The great-grandchildren of pre-millennialists would put signs beside

freeways warning, “Are you ready? Christ is coming soon!” while the grandchildren of postmillennialists are running church bureaucracies.

What the confident and socially suave postmillennialists did not know, though, was that, like the *Titanic*, another nineteenth century concept pushed into the dangerous seas of the twentieth century, postmillennialism was headed for the iceberg. To summon another metaphor, postmillennialism rested uneasily on a three-legged stool. The first leg was a naive view of the Bible as literally and factually accurate in every way. The second leg was the idea that Christianity was a religion so unlike, so superior to other religions as to constitute a difference not just in degree but in kind. Christianity was the unique revelation of God, and all other religions were but ignorant paganisms doomed to be superceded and left in Christianity’s evolutionary wake. The third leg was a proud view of human beings as superior rational and moral beings, higher than and separate from the rest of creation, and thus capable of engineering the kingdom’s arrival.

What happened to this three-legged stool? To put it in shorthand, German higher criticism and science sawed off the first leg; anthropology and the comparative study of religions sawed off the second (for example, Andrew Dickson White, the president of Cornell, reported that he lost his faith in the miracle stories of the New Testament when he discovered in the 1850s that Islamic beliefs included claims of the same sorts of miracles<sup>8</sup>); and Darwin and later Freud sawed off the third leg.

The result was that the predominant eschatology of American religion, all of its supports compromised, collapsed in a heap. Unitarian Oliver Wendell Holmes’ famous poem “The Deacon’s Masterpiece, or the Wonderful One-Hoss Shay,” which poked fun at tightly constructed Puritan theology by describing a carriage where every part was logically crafted and each piece just as strong as the next one, could just as well have described the fall of postmillennial theology:

You see, of course, if you’re not a dunce,  
How it went to pieces all at once,  
All at once, and nothing first,  
Just as bubbles do when they burst.  
End of the wonderful one-hoss shay.  
Logic is logic. That’s all I say.

Early in the twentieth century, the essayist Edmund Gosse spoke for a whole generation when he remembered the very moment when he lost his eschatological virginity, when his childhood faith in a future, coming Christ evaporated into thin air. He was a schoolboy, standing alone in the school year, and suddenly the air around him grew still. “There was,” he wrote,

an absolute silence below and around me, a magic of suspense seemed to keep every topmost twig from waving. Over my soul there swept an immense wave of emotion. Now, surely now, the great final change must be approaching. I gazed up into the tenderly-colored sky, and I broke irresistibly into speech. “Come now, Lord Jesus,” I cried....I waited awhile, watching....Then a little breeze sprang up and the branches danced....From

far below there rose to me the chatter of boys returning home. The tea bell rang. ...“The Lord has not come, the Lord will never come,” I muttered, and in my heart the artificial edifice of extravagant faith began to totter and crack.<sup>9</sup>

Essentially within the span of a single generation, the reigning eschatological view of American mainstream Christianity fell to pieces. As Ernst Troeltsch stated just before World War I, “The eschatological bureau is closed these days.”<sup>10</sup> And the mainstream pulpit grew strangely silent about the “final things.”

### *The Return of the Repressed*

The French cultural critic Andre Malraux once observed that the figure of Christ, once so prominent as a theme in classical Western art, had largely disappeared in modern art. But Christ, Malraux claimed, was not really gone. Instead of being the subject of paintings, Christ, under other names, had become absorbed as the inner principle of modern art.<sup>11</sup>

Just so, eschatology, once a major motif in American theology and preaching, did not disappear. Rather it reappeared in the form of confidence in the doctrine of progress, confidence in human powers to transform society in the present tense. The language of an eschatological future, now turned to vapor, was sucked up into the engine of the optimistic present tense, and mainstream American preachers, deprived of eschatological language, devoid of a future hope, became instead apostles of progress in its many forms – moral progress, social improvement, the “power of positive thinking,” church growth, and the psychotherapeutic gospel. Even the growing agnosticism and atheism of late nineteenth and early twentieth century America was, in the final analysis, mostly Christian eschatology transformed into a domesticated and intellectually acceptable doctrine of progress. “Progress did for unbelievers,” claims historian James Turner,

what God did for believers. The existence of God assured believers that the universe had a purpose. An agnostic had to conclude that the final purpose, if any, of the cosmos eluded human knowledge. But one could still feel that one’s own strivings did not evaporate into nothingness, that they held an infinitesimal but salient place in the pilgrimage of the race.<sup>12</sup>

To hear how the contemporary church has turned away from eschatology, listen to the words of this popular hymn, generated in the Roman Catholic world, but finding traction among progressive Protestants, too:

Not in the dark of buildings confining,  
not in some heaven, light years away—  
here in this place the new light is shining;  
now is the kingdom and now is the day!  
Gather us in and hold us forever;  
gather us in and make us your own;  
gather us in, all peoples together,  
fire of love in our flesh and our bone!<sup>13</sup>

“Not in the dark of buildings confining” is the anti-institutional, anti-embodiment prejudice of the reigning “I’m spiritual, but not religious” popular piety, and “not in some heaven, light years away” is the accompanying sarcastic rejection of the future tense as a meaningful register for religious experience. Everything is lodged in the mystical, disembodied present tense, and, having lost the power of eschatology, long before John Lennon ever penned it, twentieth century American Protestants could say, “Imagine there’s no heaven.”

This is all gathered up in quasi-gnostic popular theologians such as Marcus Borg, who claims that “Jesus himself seems to have believed in an afterlife, but he doesn’t talk about it very much.”<sup>14</sup> Actually, that statement better characterizes Borg and a host of other contemporary preachers than it does Jesus. Borg goes on to say, “Put most simply, salvation means to be saved from our predicament...[a] multilayered transformation of our lives in *this world*,”<sup>15</sup> and again, “[t]he biblical understandings of salvation are focused on this world, *not the next*.”<sup>16</sup>

The main problem with this, of course, is that this worldly theology, for all of its brave talk of transformation, is basically condemned to the possibilities already present in the human prospect. It is finally a form of pragmatic atheism, and the God who intrudes upon the closed system of the present tense is the most missed of all missing persons. As James Turner has noted about the nineteenth century, it was not the enemies of God who damaged the faith, it was the “get right with modernity” friends of God who did God in:

[R]eligion caused unbelief. In trying to adapt their religious beliefs to socioeconomic change, to new moral challenges, to novel problems of knowledge, to the tightening standards of science, the defenders of God slowly strangled Him. If anyone is to be arraigned for deicide, it is not Charles Darwin but his adversary Bishop Samuel Wilberforce; not the godless Robert Ingersoll but the godly Beecher family.<sup>17</sup>

One big piece of news in the church today is that even the evangelical Christian right, the last segment to hold onto eschatological claims, usually in premillennial form, has suffered, a century later, the same collapse of their theology of God’s future as mainstream Christians. Evangelical preachers, too, have become evangelists not for the God who breaks in from the future but instead for progress, and their sermons have moved into the present tense genre of wisdom literature. Consider Rick Warren, the Hawaiian-shirted, bare-ankled preacher to an SUV-driving congregation at California’s Saddleback Church and the author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Among his sermons on healing hidden wounds, finding the courage to make a difference, and the essentials of life, Rick Warren will throw in an occasional sermon on heaven and the afterlife, but you get the sense his heart isn’t in it. As for Joel Osteen, the pastor of Houston’s gargantuan Lakewood mega-church, his focus is firmly on the present tense, on *Your Best Life Now!*

### *The Recovery of Eschatology*

Contemporary theology is marked by a vibrant resurgence of eschatology, but so far this has bypassed American pulpit, which remains stuck in the funeral rites of the death of nineteenth century thought forms. Vibrant Christian preaching depends upon

the recovery of its eschatological voice, an eschatology that avoids the naïveté of nineteenth century literalism while insisting that the full disclosure of God is not fully contained in the present tense. As Duke Ellington once said, “There are two types of music, good and bad, and you can tell them apart by listening.” Just so, there are two types of eschatology, and you can tell them apart by living them out. The first kind of eschatology depends upon a literalistic grip on biblical images and results in a gospel that is either intellectually implausible or “pie in the sky” irrelevance. The second kind of eschatology, however, allows the eschatological affirmations that “Christ is risen!” and “Jesus is Lord!” to exercise tension upon the present tense, generating both judgment and promise.

Liturgical scholar Gordon Lathrop has insisted, “[P]reaching ought to be an eschatological event, the presence of God to create faith.”<sup>18</sup> Whatever else this might mean, it implies that preaching is God’s word, come to us from God’s future, from the time of eschatological fullness, and as such forms both a judgment upon and an offer of redemption to the present predicament.<sup>19</sup>

Years ago a student of mine told about a summer he had spent as a menial laborer on a construction crew. He said that his foreman was a person of kindness and grace. If a worker got sick on the job, he understood and made arrangements. If a worker had problems at home and was late or absent from work, he would cover for him. The one thing this foreman would not tolerate, though, was if a worker would sit down on the job before the work was done. To sit down was a sign that the job was done, and to do so beforehand was a violation of a sacred trust.

Just so, the Christian affirmation that Jesus is “seated at the right hand of God” is essentially a claim that the work is done, that, in God’s chronology, justice has been established and that, in God’s eternal time, shalom even now reigns. Eschatological preaching brings the finished work of God to bear on an unfinished world, summoning it to completion. Progress preaching tells people to gird up their loins and to use the resources at hand to make the world into God’s kingdom, and such preaching necessarily condemns people to failure and despair. Eschatological preaching promises a “new heaven and a new earth” and invites people to participate in a coming future that is open to their labors but not of their own making.

Biblical scholar J. Christiaan Beker puts it well when, in assessing the continuing value of Paul’s apocalyptic and eschatological thought for today, he points out that claims like Borg’s that “biblical understandings of salvation are focused on this world, *not the next*” imply a false and unbiblical dichotomy:

[W]e must seriously attend to the beckoning power of God’s coming triumph without losing ourselves either in chronological speculations or in a denial of the coming actualization of God’s promise. God’s act in Christ focuses our attention on the present time as an “apocalyptic” time, that is, on the either-or of our allegiance: do we *either* serve Christ *or* the powers of this world? The apocalyptic categories of Paul’s gospel focus primarily on the “now” of our decision, but *they do so only because of the motivating and beckoning power of God’s final triumph*. For the “now” of our decision is only then realistic when it is inspired by the vision of God’s kingdom. Without that apocalyptic vision, our hope becomes *either* a romantic

illusion *or* a constrictive demand because it collapses God's coming triumph in our present personal stance and will power.<sup>20</sup>

But where will preachers today find fresh language to speak the eschatological claims of the gospel? Strangely enough, the most promising revival of eschatological hope is appearing not just among systematic theologians, but among artists and novelists, and it is to them that we must now turn.

## Notes

1. *United Presbyterian A.D.* (October, 1981), 16 as quoted in J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel: The Coming Triumph of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 12-13.
2. *United Presbyterian A.D.* (December, 1981), 8 as quoted in Beker, 13.
3. James H. Moorhead, *World Without End: Mainstream Protestant Visions of the Last Things, 1880-1925* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1999), xiii.
4. *Ibid.*, xii.
5. *Ibid.*, xiv.
6. *Ibid.*
7. John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, Second Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 17.
8. James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 155.
9. Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963, original edition 1907), 231-232, as quoted in Moorhead, xi.
10. Ernst Troeltsch as quoted in F. L. Polak, *The Image of the Future* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1961), 243.
11. See John B. Cobb, Jr., *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), chap. 1.
12. Turner, 237.
13. "Here in this Place," words by Marty Haugen, copyright 1982 by GIA Publications, Inc.
14. Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2003), 173.
15. *Ibid.*, 178, emphasis mine.
16. *Ibid.*, 172, emphasis mine.
17. Turner, xiii.
18. Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Pastor: A Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 49.
19. *Ibid.*, 50.
20. *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel: The Coming Triumph of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 118.