

Making Eschatology Personal

[This is part of a chapter which we cut from *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (Harper, 2010). The eighth of the ten questions identified in the subtitle deals with eschatology – our vision of the future, the afterlife, etc. In the chapter I suggest that most of our conventional eschatologies are deterministic, working from the assumption that the script of future is already written, or the movie of the future is already filmed. As an alternative, I propose a *participatory eschatology* where the creation of our future is a joint venture between humanity and God, and I offer a reading of a key biblical text as an example of that alternative approach.

In my early drafts of the book, I attempted to deal with both the personal and the global/historical dimensions of a participatory eschatology. It became clear as the book grew in length and complexity, however, that it would be wiser to limit the book's scope to the issue of what kind of future we expect for planet earth in history. That left the personal dimension – what we can expect for ourselves as individuals after death -- to be explored some other time. I hope to return to that important subject in much more detail at some point in the future, but for now, here is the material, slightly re-edited, that we cut from *A New Kind of Christianity*.]

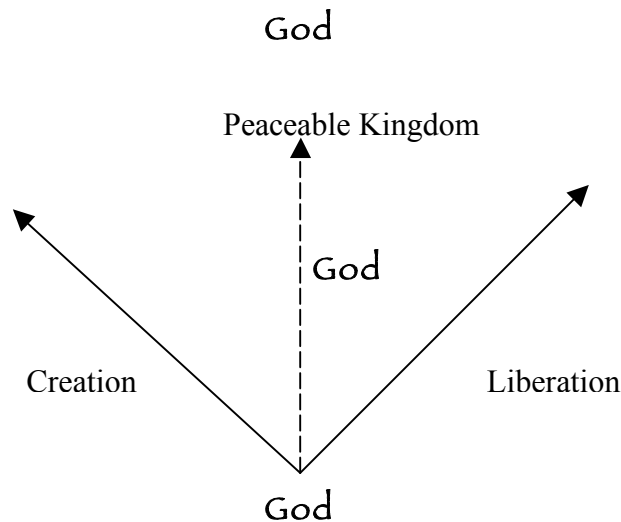
“That’s all very beautiful and inspiring,” someone is saying right about now, “but what about the afterlife for me personally? You’re talking so much about God’s future for all

creation, and what your saying is certainly more hopeful and more challenging than what I've heard in the past. But mortality rates are pretty high and I'm not getting any younger. So what does this participatory understanding of eschatology have to say about the afterlife – for me as an individual?"

This is a fair and important question, because eschatology is a personal matter, not just a cosmic one. For us mortals, the crazy-looking guys in the sandwich boards are right: the end will surely come in a matter of days, years, or decades. As I've tried to rethink this important subject outside the old familiar six-line, Greco-Roman narrative [a topic explored in chapters 4, 5, 6, and 18 of the book], and in the context of the three biblical narratives as we've explored them in these pages, I've found a vision of death and the afterlife that are, for me, even more wonderful, humbling, motivating, and hope-filled than I had before. I could sum up my emerging understanding of the afterlife by returning to our previous diagram, but this time, adding God to the picture. [This diagram presents three primary biblical narratives – the Genesis narrative of creation, the Exodus narrative of liberation, and the Isaiah narrative of reconciliation and height, length, and depth, creating what I call in Chapter 18 a 3-D *story-space* instead of a 2-D *story-line*.]

Where do we locate God? Is God in the past, before the original singularity that erupted in the Big Bang? Yes, God must be in the past, or the past must be in God: the past can't be lost or forgotten to God. And is God in the present, with us as the universe expands and our story unfolds? Yes, God must be in the present. And can we also say that God is in the future and the future in God, and that life is, in a sense, an invitation to move

toward God in the future and toward the future in God? Yes, God must in some real sense be in the future, as are past and present.



Now even though I'm placing God's name in three places, we need to remember there is only one God – the God who was, who is, and who is to come. The God who was with us yesterday in the past and is with us today in the present and will be with us tomorrow and forever in the future is the same God. (We could picture this by placing our expanding 3-D universe in a larger sphere called God, but that might create some other problems – as all diagrams and illustrations seem to do.) So, with that realization in mind, death could never mean leaving God, because there is nowhere we can escape from God's presence, as the Psalmist said (139:7). Instead, death simply means leaving the presence of God in this little neighborhood of history called the present. Now assuming that the past is actually past so we can't go back to it, what does that mean? It means, I suggest, that in death we join God in the vast, forever-expanding future.

This helps me understand what Jesus may have meant when he said that to God, all who ever lived are alive (Luke 20:38). In that light, death is merely a doorway, a passage from one way of living in God's presence (in the present) to another way of living in God's presence (in the open space of unseized possibility in the future). The amazing grace that has "brought us safe thus far" will "lead us home" through the doorway of death. This approach locates heaven -- or the center or headquarters, so to speak, of presence of God -- not in another realm (like the realm of Platonic forms), and not above us (as if God were in the sky), but instead ahead of us in time, or perhaps better said, in the flow of possibility which the future constantly brings to us.

The experience of joining God in the future necessarily entails crossing a threshold called *judgment*. But sadly, that word has been defined for us – and thoroughly spoiled for us - in the old Greco-Roman narrative. In that linear narrative, *judgment* means condemnation, and as such, is bad news for all of us sinners. It means little more than punishing wrong. But in this 3-D narrative, *judgment* means more than condemnation and punishment. It means setting things right, dealing decisively with evil and freeing good to run wild. For the oppressed and persecuted, that means liberation and vindication, and for the hypocrites and oppressors, it means exposure and accountability. But in the end, to have evil decisively exposed, named, dealt with, and removed ... in the end, that's good news for everyone.

After death, then, in God's presence in the future, all pretense and hypocrisy, like all hidden virtues and goodness, are brought to light, because in God there can be no darkness or deceit or ignorance. This means that the true accounting, evaluation, or assessment of our lives cannot help but happen.¹ This true accounting, evaluation, or assessment will not be harsh, merciless, or graceless, as many assume, because in God, what we may think of as opposites -- grace and truth, justice and mercy, kindness and strength -- are beautifully and fully integrated. God never expresses justice at the expense of kindness, or vice versa, but every expression of justice is kind and every expression of kindness is just. God's integrated judgment, then, could never be merely retributive -- seeking to punish wrongdoers for their wrongs and in this way balance some sort of karmic cosmic equation. No, God's judgment would have to be far higher and better than that: it would have to be restorative. It would aim far higher than merely convicting people of wrong (which is easy); its goal would be universal repentance, universal restoration, universal reconciliation, universal purification, universal "putting wrong things right," which is a God-sized task. In this sense, achieving judgment means achieving a right outcome, which in turn means reconciling, not merely punishing; treating and healing, not merely diagnosing; transforming, not merely exposing; redeeming (or giving value), not merely evaluating.

So when we say, with the writer of Hebrews, that "it is appointed to human beings to die once, and after this, the judgment," we are not saying, "and after this, the

¹ For more on this subject, see Romans 14:9-13; Hebrews 4:12-13.

condemnation.”² We are saying, with John, that to “see God,” to be in God’s unspeakable light, will purge us of all darkness:

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! ... Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this open in them purify themselves, just as God is pure. (1 John 3:1-3)

Since “what we will be has not yet been made known,” it is hard to say anything more, except this: In the end, God will be all in all, and all will be well.³

Does that mean there will be no cost, no loss, no regret, nor mourning? Of course not. Paul’s image of a cleansing fire is appropriate here. God’s fire can’t consume “gold, silver, and precious stones,” because in so doing, God would be destroying something good, which would render God evil. But the cleansing fire must destroy the “wood, hay, and stubble” of hypocrisy, evil, sin. Some of us, Paul said, will experience this as a great loss, suggesting that once the evil or worthless thoughts, words, and deeds of our story are burned away, there will not be much of our life’s story left. We will be saved “by fire,” he says; perhaps we’d say “by the skin of our teeth.” But others of us, recalling Jesus’ parable about the sheep and the goats, will be surprised in a positive way:

² Hebrews 9:27.

³ 1 Corinthians 15:24-28.

thousands of forgotten deeds of kindness will have been remembered by God, and we will feel the reward of God's "well done."

This kind of hope for life beyond death changes the way you live before death. It makes you eager to use your wealth to make others rich, not to hoard it; to use your power to empower others, not to protect yourself; to give and give so that you will finish this life having given more than you received, thus "laying up treasures in heaven." It encourages you to try to be secretive about your good deeds because you would rather defer the return on your investment to the future. In fact, this hope makes you willing to give up this life for things that matter more than life itself. Dr. King knew this. His hope beyond death emboldened him to say:

To our most bitter opponents we say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so

appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.⁴

We've all heard the cliché about someone being “so heavenly minded he's no earthly good,” and we've probably met people – and congregations, and denominations – on whom the cliché fits like an old bedroom slipper. But I hope now it's becoming clear: there is also a way of being so earthly minded that you're no earthly good, and there's a way of being heavenly minded so that you are more earthly good than you ever could have been any other way. To be liberated from the fear of death – that's one of the greatest liberations of all. To believe in a new creation that arises from within this creation – that's a source of true hope and courage. To participate in a network of relationships that begins before death but isn't limited by death in the slightest degree ... that's an invitation to live life abundant, life to the full, life of the ages.

So, making my eschatology personal, what do I expect to happen when I die? I expect to experience death as a passage, like birth, like passing through a door. I don't know how that passing will come ... like a slow slipping away in disease, like a sudden jolt or shock in an accident, like losing my grip and feeling that I'm falling, only to discover that I'm not falling out of life, but deeper into it.

On the other side, I imagine I will be in the unimaginable light of God's presence, a goodness so good, a richness so rich, a holiness so holy, a mercy and love so strong and

⁴ From *A Christmas Sermon on Peace*, December 24, 1967. Widely available online, including <http://portland.indymedia.org/en/2003/12/276406.shtml>.

true that all of my evil, pride, lust, greed, resentment, and fear will be instantly melted out of me. I imagine that I will at that moment more fully understand how God has in mercy and grace borne the pain of forgiving and cleansing me, because I think forgiveness is indeed agonizing, as Jesus' suffering on the cross embodies. I imagine that at that moment, because I will know more than ever how much I have been forgiven, I will more than ever be filled with love ... for God, and with God, for everyone and everything.

I imagine I will feel a sense of reunion – yes, with loved ones who have died, but also with my great-great-great-great-grandparents and my thirty-second cousins whose names I've never known but to whom I am related. I imagine that sense of relatedness that I now feel with closest of kin will somehow be expanded to every person who has ever lived. And I doubt it will stop with human beings, but will expand infinitely outwards to all of God's creation. I imagine that I will feel the fullest, most exquisite sense of oneness and interrelatedness and harmony that I approached vaguely or clumsily in my most ecstatic moments in this life.

I imagine that I will instantly feel differently about my sufferings. I will see, not the short-term pain that so preoccupied me on the past side of death, but instead the virtue and courage and compassion that were beaten into me through each fall of the hammer of pain. On the future side of death, I imagine that I will bless my sufferings, and feel about them as I feel about my pleasures now; I may in fact feel about many of my pleasures then as I feel about my sufferings now. What has been suffered or lost will feel weightless compared to the substance that has been gained through the suffering and loss.

I imagine that in all this, I will feel a sense of ... “Ah yes, now I see.” What I longed for, reached for, touched but couldn’t grasp, will then be so clear, and all of my unfulfilled longing on this side of death will, I imagine, enrich and fulfill the having on that side of death.

I’m fifty-three as I write these words, and I’ve already been so blessed. If my life ended today, seventeen years short of the traditional “three-score and ten,” I would have had far more than my share of joy. So I imagine that my entry into life with God beyond this life will feel like an explosion of gratitude as I suddenly and fully realize all I’ve had and taken for granted.

I have also accrued a lengthy and grave list of regrets ... and the older I get, the more readily these regrets spring to mind: a mentally retarded child (that was the term we used back then) to whom I was inexcusably cruel as a boy, being overly stern with my kids when they were young, letting some ugly and unhealthy ambitions drive me in my thirties and early forties, never managing my thought-life as I would have hoped to, being too preoccupied and in too big a hurry too much of the time. Somehow, I imagine that as I pass through the doorway of death, these regrets will somehow be both validated and put away: *yes, you were right to be sad about those things, and many more like them, but now they are behind you. You were always forgiven, and now you can appreciate for just how much that means.*

I am certain that in my case there will be many regrets like these, and I imagine I will experience them as bittersweet recognitions: wishing I had done better ... given more generously, served more sacrificially, risked more daringly, waited more patiently, forgiven more freely, endured more graciously, and loved more selflessly ... and grateful that I didn't do worse. Interestingly – I'm simply reporting what I feel as I write these words – having this hope in me makes me want to do these very things now, on this side of death, while I still can.

I imagine, then, that dying will be like diving or falling or stepping into a big wave at the beach, and I will feel myself lifted off my feet, and taken up into a swirl and curl and spin more powerful than I can now imagine. But there will not be fear, because the motion and flow will be the dance of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the rising tide will be life and joy; the undertow will be love, and I will be drawn deeper and deeper in.

So I think I am being honest to say that I don't fear death. I don't look forward to the process of dying. I would be happy if it were short and painless and occurred in my sleep. I hope I can live a long life and enjoy watching my grandchildren grow and have children of their own. But because of who I believe God to be, I do not fear passing into a more direct experience of God. I begin to understand the pull that Paul wrote about (Philippians 1:20 ff). On the one hand, I feel a pull to stay here in this life, enjoying the light and love and goodness of God with so many people who are dear to me, with so much good work left to be done. On the other hand, I feel an equal and opposite pull

towards the light and love and goodness of God experienced more directly beyond this life:

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two...

When I was a pastor, I had some indescribably intense and poignant moments with people who were very close to dying, or who had just witnessed a dying. On more than one occasion, someone took my hand or seized my gaze and asked me, in simplest terms, what I thought it would be like on the other side. Of course I thought of Paul's words – "No eye has seen, nor has any ear heard, nor any human heart imagined what God has prepared...." I was tempted to say something general and comforting, but I somehow knew that the directness of their question was calling for a very personal response from me. They were asking me, not simply as a pastor, but as a fellow human being who is going to die someday. So in those holy moments, I would say something like this:

Tonight, I might go home and fall asleep and have a dream about you. In my dream, you would say things you've never said and do things you have never done. What I know of you through my experience has created a version of you in my mind that, in a dream, can be activated and set free for a new existence.

Well, God's knowledge of you is infinitely more full than my knowledge of you. God remembers every dimension of every dimension of your existence, even those that are completely unknown to you. So the version of you that God holds in God's mind is the most real version of you anywhere. Not only is it accurate in this moment, but it is comprehensive across time.

I faintly understand this when I look at one of my adult children. When I look at one of my sons, I see a man in his twenties, but I knew that face when it was wrinkly and fresh from the birth canal, and when it was giggling in the bathtub, and when it was focused on a soccer ball that could be kicked through a goal, and when it was blowing out birthday candles, and when it was beaming on graduation day. In a sense, when I look at my son in this moment, I can recall my son through all my moments with him. Again, I multiply that kind of knowledge by a million, billion times, and I begin to imagine what it is like to be known by God.

So, when the atoms and molecules that sustain my life on this earth stop working, when the chemical reactions slow and stop and my embodied life is over, I am confident that I will be retained – saved, if you will, remembered like a computer saves data – in the loving mind of God. But of course, God is no computer: God is a creator. So just as I can set my knowledge of you free in a dream, I can imagine God setting God's knowledge of me alive in some new way beyond this life, in ways and through mechanisms that I can't begin to understand.

And one more thing. When I think of one of my sons or daughters, I don't let his or her failures and faults dictate my view of him or her. Sadly, some people present God as if this were the case in God's dealings with us. No, because I love my daughter, I interpret her failures and faults in light of her needs, her weaknesses, her struggles. And because I love my daughter, my understanding of her radiant strengths and glowing successes shine all the more brightly against the backdrop of her dark or weak sides. So I can't know my son or daughter apart from my love for him or her, and I believe it is the same with God – not only as God deals with me, but as God deals with every single human who ever lived. To be known by God, to be remembered by God, is to be immersed in perfect love, perfect saving, perfect justice, perfect holiness, perfect kindness, perfect truth, perfect wonder, all perfectly integrated. This is one of the many reasons Jesus is so important to me: I believe that the way Jesus looked at imperfect, broken, needy people perfectly images the compassionate way God will always look at all of us. In the compassionate eyes and heart of Jesus, I see the character of God.

So when this body can no longer serve as the hardware to support the software of my life, I am confident that my complete program will be saved on God's hardware, so to speak. And I am confident that it will not only be stored there: it will be restored, reactivated, set free like a dream, set free to run and grow and live again. And that life will not be less than this; it can only be more, the dream come true. That's why in the moment of my death, I want to let go of this life – with gratitude for all that has been - and trust myself to God – with hope for all that is to come.

So this is how I see my personal eschatology. I imagine that the closer I get to the crossing of the threshold, the more my understanding will grow. But when I compare what I can see here to what will be plain beyond the threshold ... Frederick Buechner's words come to mind, given at a commencement address at Union Seminary in Richmond.

With God, I believe, every ending is a commencement:

The world is full of dark shadows, to be sure both the world without and the world within ... But praise and trust [God] too for the knowledge that what's lost is nothing to what's found, and that all the dark there ever was, set next to light, would scarcely fill a cup.

[For more about *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That are Transforming the Faith*, go to www.brianmclaren.net. Questions for group discussion, video introductions, and other resources are available there as well. The book is published in the U.S. by HarperOne, and can be purchased through any bookstore or online bookseller.]

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