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TSF BULLETIN

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 1981

TSF BULLETIN VOL. 5 No. 1
 (Formerly *TSF News & Reviews*)
 Published by Theological Students
 Fellowship, 233 Langdon, Madison WI
 53703. ISSN No. 0272-3913

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FOUNDATIONS

(Doing theology on the basics of classical faith)

WHICH ESCHATOLOGY FOR WHICH CHRIST?

By Vernard Eller, University of LaVerne (CA).

Dr. Eller, who is a member of the Church of the Brethren, originally delivered this paper at a conference on the Believers Church, held at Bluffton College (OH) in October, 1980. Although in its broadest sense "the Believers Church" includes all bodies that practice baptism at the age of accountability rather than infant baptism, this series of conferences is supported predominantly by a much smaller group of churches representing the radical discipleship of the Anabaptist-Mennonite-Brethren line. In this paper, then, references to the Believers Church tradition would apply more directly to the smaller grouping than to the larger.

We have received Dr. Eller's permission to edit his manuscript to conform to our editorial policy concerning inclusive language. Eller provides a critique of the contemporary stress on inclusive language in his new book, forthcoming from Eerdmans, Language of Canaan.

This paper will appear in two installments, concluding in our November-December issue. Eller's ideas are not only relevant to contemporary theological discussions, but also have profound implications for evangelism, personal commitment, and church life.

It may be accurate enough, but it is not sufficient to say that any true understanding of Christ must understand him within an eschatological context. We must proceed to specify which eschatology for which Christ. Either "which" presents us with a number of options. Let us first consider "eschatology." In the next installment, we will explore "Christ."

I. Sorting Out the Types

Biblical/Philosophical

We must be ready to treat eschatology on four levels. On the first, we have a *biblically* derived eschatology over against any that is *philosophically*, or rationally, derived. Our Believers Church tradition obviously opts strongly for the former. Because the Bible is our rule of faith and practice, the eschatological side of our faith will want to come from that same fountainhead.

TSF BULLETIN (Formerly *TSF News & Reviews*) is published bi-monthly during the academic year (September-June). A regular subscription costs \$10.00 per year (\$8/yr. students), and includes in addition three issues of *Themelios*, the theological journal of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. A subscription to *TSF Bulletin* without *Themelios* costs \$6.50 per year. Bulk subscription rates are available on request.

TSF Bulletin is published by Theological Students Fellowship, 233 Langdon, Madison, WI 53703. Application to mail at second-class postage rates is pending at Madison, WI.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to TSF Subscriptions, 233 Langdon, Madison, WI 53703.

Demythologized/Realistic/Literalistic

On the second level, having determined that we now are to be *biblical*, it would seem to follow that our eschatology be *realistic* — this rather than either the *demythologized* version on the left or the *literalistic* on the right. As "demythologized," I have in mind the view which holds that the familiar eschatological teaching of the Bible is actually a mythic expression of the secular dreams and aspirations of oppressed people which, in turn, proves useful in inspiring them to work at radical social change. Thus the common eschatological hope, "God will come and save us," is understood as a mythic way of saying, "We can save ourselves" ("God" now denoting "the as yet unrealized human potential which our mythic dreams can move toward accomplishment.") Demythologized eschatology functions as nothing more than a psychological device for mustering human effort toward social change and is manifestly a travesty of what the biblical writers wanted to affirm. Unfortunately, there is a great deal of this so-called "eschatology" current among us; and we must be constantly alert to spot it and identify it for what it is.

Over against that, the *realistic* eschatology for which I am arguing is one that places its hope in the real promises of a real, wholly-other God whose real past, present, and promised actions in no way *depend upon* human effort, response, or even perception (although, of course, they do call for and *desire* appropriate human response). Demythologized eschatology assumes and appeals directly to "human heroism"; realistic eschatology gives God the glory in a way that expressly leaves no room for *human* heroism.

At the same time, this realistic eschatology must also be just as carefully distinguished from its *literalistic* neighbor on the right. Realism does peg its stance upon the actuality of a super-historical God who has, who can, and who will actively intervene both within the historical process and in bringing it to consummation. However, it does not follow that all of the Bible's eschatological pictures must be taken as photographic representations of those interventions. In this regard, the Bible's own divergency and even discrepancy of imagery constitute evidence enough that futuristic calendarizing and tour-guiding are not the order of the day — that these pictures are meant as *theological symbol*, even though symbolizing that which can be expected as very real event. That God will act as promised we can be certain; yet the timing and logistics of that action we can safely leave to him.

Surely, on the right, literalistic eschatology is currently just as popular as the demythologized variety is on the left. And if the one is "unbiblical," the other misses the mark just as far in its "biblical overkill." The realistic middle regularly tends to get squeezed out (or perhaps seduced away); but I would contend that it is the only truly biblical position. We will need to keep alert both ways.

Futurist/Realized/In-Process-of-Realizing-Itself

On the third level, we must choose among the three alternatives that have developed within the course of New Testament scholarship. The *futurist* position holds that eschatology itself (and thus, particularly, the biblical teachings) consists in talk about and prediction of essentially *future* events, things that haven't happened yet but will someday (whether that future be near or far away). That is to say, we presently are still somewhere this side of the eschatological starting point. Although literalistic eschatologists do discover "signs" in the present, their thought almost inevitably falls into this futurist category.

Realized eschatology, on the contrary, holds that God already has performed all the intervention he needs to do or will do. The customary form of realized eschatology proposes that the gospel actually amounts to a proclamation that the eschatological promises of God *have been* accomplished; that, ever now, we hold as much of kingdom possibility as we ever shall;

that, in effect, Jesus' "resurrection" was his second coming. Yet this term "realized" needs to be read a bit more inclusively; it should be understood to cover not only "that which *has been realized*" but also "that which *directly can be realized*." In either case, no new intervention of God is anticipated or wanted. And rather plainly, the demythologized eschatology discussed above inevitably shows up as a form of realized eschatology; the human potential for creating the end-state of perfected society is already in our possession.

Now, through a careful process of pick-and-choose, New Testament texts can be found to support either a futurist, or a realized view. However, our third option, the in-process-of-realizing-itself view (which phrase is a German invention, as you might guess) holds that such use of the texts is bad business and that forcing the issue between "futurist" and "realized" is to pose a false choice. This third view, then, *combines* texts and truths from each of the others. Thus, Christian eschatology *does* focus upon particular future, interventionist events — such as the return of Christ, the final judgment, the creation of the new Jerusalem. However, these very events represent a reality of such imminent power that they cannot be confined solely to the future. They are "coming" events in the sense that they already are "in process" as well as that they will someday "arrive." Thus, as just one instance, the coming of the Holy Spirit (and our present life in the Spirit) is understood as an eschatological event happening "in the last days" — an "already" that itself moves toward and participates in the "not yet" of seeing him face-to-face.

In its earlier development, New Testament scholarship was spread over all three of our alternatives. My impression now is that reputable scholars have come to a rather strong consensus that the textual evidence itself will support nothing but the third, "in process" view. If the Believers Church tradition is committed to being *biblical*, we have no choice but to resist both the futurist and the realized options and come down here (which, I am prepared to argue, is where our progenitors generally were by instinct even before the options ever got defined).

Speculated/Lived

Our fourth and final level is as crucial as any. *Speculative* eschatology — predominantly futurist — is that in which the eschatologist has no interest and feels no obligation to do anything except "figure out" the chronology, timing, and detail of the eschatological calendar. Doing eschatology is now primarily an intellectual, exegetical activity. It is customarily treated either as the whole of theology or as the last session of a course, or the last chapter of a book, on systematic theology. Eschatology is compartmentalized — seen as having little to do with the remainder of theology and as good as nothing to do with practical matters of ethics and discipleship.

Conversely, *lived* eschatology — which as much as

demands the "already" aspects of the "in process" view — is anything but compartmentalized. Quite the contrary, it is precisely the wholistic, totalist perspective from which every aspect of the Christian faith and life is to be understood. Indeed, looking back over my own writing career, I one day realized that all in the world I have ever done is to eschatologize whatever I touched. Name the book, and I could tell you what it was I was eschatologizing and prove to you that such was indeed the case. And there is no question at all but that it has been my grounding in the Believers Church tradition that has led me in this direction. So, to follow up the implications of this "lived eschatology" becomes the purpose of the section of this study to which we now proceed.

II. Seeing Beyond The Horizon

The material here to be presented can be found in more detail — though also directed to a more specific concern — as part of the final chapter of my book, *War and Peace From Genesis to Revelation* (Herald Press, 1981).

I must begin by picking something of a lover's quarrel with the structure of our conference program. Its tri-partite division clearly implies that eschatology represents one authentic but partial dimension of Christology (*future oriented*), which then needs to be complemented by present and past oriented dimensions. Yet that, I think, is wrong. "Eschatology" identifies the Bible's one, totalist perspective (*future oriented* but by no means *future confined*) — or at least it will be *my* definition. Our other two divisions, then, should be seen as treating specialized aspects of eschatology. Yet they will need to keep cognizant of the gospel's fundamentally eschatological setting, for it is in that setting they must be judged.

I propose that all various worldviews can be divided into just two categories: the "Secular" and the "Eschatological" — but please do not draw any conclusions from the words themselves until we have had opportunity to define them. It is most important that we protect the terminology from misunderstanding. In particular, ours is not a distinction simply between church-related faith and activity and those not so related; much, even, of what goes on inside churches will finally have to be qualified as "secular." Neither is ours a distinction between Christians and non-Christians; people who call themselves "Christians" are to be found in both groups, and the name of Jesus very well may be invoked in both. Likewise, there are concepts of God that will accord very nicely with what we are calling "the secular," so the distinction cannot be simply that between believers and atheists. Our categories are more subtle and less obvious than any of these; so we will need to take care in understanding them.

The English word "secular" is derived from the Latin term for "century" or "age," thus denoting "that which is of this age." In particular, we shall use "secular" as referring to "what can be accomplished *through human resources* within the limits of history as we know it." The root assumption is that historical possibility includes nothing more than what human wisdom and technique can make of it.

The word "eschatological," on the other hand, comes from the Greek for "end" or "goal" and denotes "thought and activity that is *end-state oriented*, directed toward an ultimate goal that lies *beyond* the potential simply of this age." The secularist, of course, *believes* he is operating out of a total view of reality. Yet, in the eyes of an eschatologist, the secular perspective inevitably is seen as terribly partial and constricted.

This observation enables us to present a diagram — one that you can draw in your mind's eye better than I can on paper. Begin by making an X to mark the spot on which stands "the secularist." Around him draw a circle (as large or small as seems right) circumscribing "the present age," "this world," "history as we know it." And recall that, within this circle, along with the secularist, are to be found the institutional church, an understanding of Jesus, that which can be called "God," and

EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The Evangelical Theological Society will hold its annual meeting at Ontario Theological Seminary (Toronto) December 28-30, 1981. The general theme, "Relationships Between the Testaments" will receive attention from many scholars, including Daniel P. Fuller and Paul Feinberg (Old Testament law and the New Testament); Ronald Sider and Frank Gaebelien (various issues in social ethics); Richard Longenecker, Ian Rennie, and Carl Armerding (distinctives in Canadian academics); and Clark Pinnock and Paul Holmer (Scripture). Paralleling the ETS sessions, the Evangelical Philosophical Society and the Near Eastern Archaeological Society will also be meeting. For further information, write to Simon Kistemaker, Reformed Theological Seminary, 5422 Clinton Blvd., Jackson, MS 39209.

particular versions of Christianity — all of which a true eschatologist would deem “partial” yet have to recognize as “actual” for all that.

The trick of this diagram, then, lies in *not* making a new X upon which to place “the eschatologist.” Most of all, that eschatologist is *not* to be put outside the secular circle. All tendencies to make the diagram represent two distinct and separate spheres are to be firmly resisted. It is not to be suggested, for instance, that the secularist is one who centers his existence upon *earth* while the eschatologist centers hers upon *heaven*, the secularist upon *the physical* and the eschatologist upon *the spiritual*, the secularist upon *the present* and the eschatologist upon *the future*, or anything of the sort. Our distinction does not lie in any kind of “dualism.”

No, the eschatologist is to be placed on the very same X with the secularist; there is no distinction as to *location* at all. The difference is that the secularist’s horizon simply does not exist for the eschatologist. She sees right over it, past it, through it — state it as you will; represent it graphically if you can. And it is not that the eschatologist pierces that horizon at just one point or only in one direction; no, the horizon simply disappears. Thus, the eschatologist can see *back* to what were *God’s purposes* in creating the world in the first place, while the secularist cannot even see that there was present a God who had purposes. The eschatologist can look *around* to see a non-horizoned God who has acted within history and who presently is acting so, while the secularist, at best, can call “God” only something from within the horizon, something much too small and weak for a real God. And the eschatologist can see *ahead* to God’s promises and commitments regarding where history is to *come out*, while the secularist cannot see that history even has “a coming out.” The eschatologist can see all the secularist sees *and more*; but because she does see *more*, she also will *understand* quite differently the secular reality that the two of them see together. A chapter read as part of a longer novel will render a much different sense than if it be read as though it were meant for a short story, complete in itself.

Deutero-Isaiah, indeed, pegs the truth of Yahweh’s being God precisely upon this understanding of eschatology:

Let them come forward, these idols,
let them foretell the future.
Let them declare the meaning of past events
that we may give our minds to it;
let them predict things that are to be
that we may know their outcome.
Declare what will happen hereafter:
then we shall know you are gods.

See how the first prophecies have come to pass,
and now I declare new things:
before they break from the bud I announce them to
you.

Here and now I will do a new thing:
this moment it will break from the bud.
Can you not perceive it?

— Isaiah 41:22-23a; 42:9; 43:19a (NEB)

Above, the use of the term “horizon” was intended to point to an analogy that will further our thought. The secularist, now, is to be identified as “a flatlander,” i.e., a person who believes that the earth is flat. The eschatologist, conversely, is a “round-earthier” who knows that it is a sphere.

The secular assumption regarding the limits of life and history is in its own way as obvious and natural as was the original assumption that the earth is flat: within the everyday horizon of our human finitude, that is precisely how things “look.” Never-

TSF IMPROVES SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE

The current issue of *TSF Bulletin* is the first to be mailed from the computer’s new subscription system. After months and years of makeshift procedures, we now expect to process subscriptions much more accurately. Having made this new beginning, now is the time for us to make good our old debts. If you or someone you know have not received issues that were paid for, please let us know and we will try to send them to you. You can help us in the future by continuing to report any missed issues, and by keeping us well informed of any address changes. Please make sure that the name and address printed on this current issue is accurate, and feel free to offer any suggestions you may have at any time. Thank you for being such patient and supportive subscribers during our years of struggling in this area.

theless, the discovery that the world actually is round did not have to await the eschatologists’ being lifted up and off their X to where they could see the curvature of the earth beyond the horizon. No, the discovery was made from the very same spot, seeing the very same things that secular flatlanders could see and always had seen. What the eschatological round-earthers had learned was correctly to interpret the evidence of astronomical movements or of ships “sinking” out of sight below the horizon. All they had to do was “see” what everyone had been “looking at”: the whole time, the world itself had included signals trying to tell them that its “horizon” was an illusion.

Just so, becoming a Christian eschatologist does not involve being lifted out of this world into some transcendent realm or being given magic spectacles to see invisible reality. No, it is another case of catching the true significance of what has always been there to be seen. The difference is that round-earthers made their discovery out of their sharp wits and natural intelligence, whereas Christian eschatologists have learned to see by being taught of God. But the Apostle Paul stated our idea rather precisely: “When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; the old order has gone, and a new order has already begun” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Obviously, Paul does not mean to say that, at the moment of accepting Christ, one is transported from this world to another one. Just as obviously, that moment does not mark the disappearance of this world and its replacement by the kingdom of God. No, what *does* happen is that one “sees” the entire world (and all its people) “newly.” The old, secular, flatlander interpretation is gone; and the new, true, eschatological signification has already begun.

Yet notice what follows. It is not so much that the secularist’s (or flatlander’s) is an utterly *false* reading of things as that his is a *partial*, or *limited*, viewpoint which, sooner or later, is bound to distort the truth. Goodness knows, there were a great many things people could and did do correctly and well, even when we were all flatlanders. Indeed, even now, when as good as all of us are enlightened round-earthers, we still perform most of our functions under the old premises of a flat earth.

However, I would suggest, even if a true-believing flatlander and a modern round-earthier were working side by side — both making the same motions and together acting as though the earth were flat — there would still be a major difference between them. The round-earthier would have a true understanding of what she was doing and why. She would not be vulnerable to having her entire worldview knocked into a cocked hat by chancing upon phenomena that flatlander premises cannot handle. The round-earthier would be free to see whatever is to be seen rather than having to ignore or explain away the presence of that which would threaten her understanding of things. And of course, as soon as both came to matters of map-making, astronomy, long-range navigation, radio communica-

1, or space travel, the flatlander would be left helpless. All of which is to say that, even though secularist wisdom ought not be condemned as all wrong, it cannot be accepted as all right, either.

Given this understanding of "eschatology," I submit three quick observations:

(1) Everything we know about the New Testament church — faith, its worship, its Scriptures, its practice, its life — would indicate that its perspective was thoroughly and consistently end-earth *eschatological*.

(2) However, it does not follow that all (or even any) consequent versions of Christianity have retained the orientation. Indeed, regarding the Believers Church interpretation of "the fall of Christendom" under Constantine, I would suggest that the key to that entire catastrophe was the church's trading its eschatological birthright for a mess of secular pottage. And my apprehension of the church today is that it, too, is very strongly secularized, displaying very little of eschatological understanding or commitment. And what eschatology it does know tends to be either that of liberal, realized demythology or else of ultra-conservative speculation and literalism.

(3) Notwithstanding this sad state of affairs, it is my conviction that, within church history of the modern era, as something of a subconscious influence from our commitment to the New Testament, the Believers Church tradition marks the closest approach to a recovery of the original eschatological vision. In saying that, I am talking about our sainted progenitors and not venturing any opinion about the present state of our churches. At least we do still have our Bibles and perhaps some vestigial memory of how to go about reading them. Round-earth eschatology ought not be an entirely impossible option for us.

An aside: To the best of my knowledge, among moderns, it was the Blumhardts, father and son, who first did a deliberate eschatology based on biblical eschatology and thus fed the emphasis into contemporary thought. You can test that thesis with my *Why Kingdom Come: A Blumhardt Reader* (Eerdmans, 1980).

The conclusion of this article will appear in the November-December issue.

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE

The 1981 Annual Meetings of the AAR/SBL will be held in San Francisco December 19-22, 1981. In addition to the usual array of papers, discussions, panels, and receptions, TSF members may be interested in the three sessions sponsored by the Group on Evangelical Theology. Chaired by Mark Lau Branson, topics of these sessions include Evangelicals and Karl Barth, Evangelicals and Politics, and Evangelicals and Process Theology. Participants include Donald Dayton, George Hunsinger, Ray Anderson, David Gill, Grant Osborne, Paul Feinberg, John Culp, and others.

The roundtable discussion on Process Theology will be limited to fifteen participants and requires that all attending read the four papers in advance. Reservations should be made through the AAR. All registration correspondence should be sent to Scholars Press, P.O. Box 2268, Chico, CA 95927.

The Institute of Biblical Research, a group of evangelical biblical scholars, will be having its annual meeting during the AAR/SBL events. Further information can be obtained from Carl Armerding, Regent College, 2330 Westbrook Mall, Vancouver, BC, V6T 1W6, Canada.

INQUIRY

(Questions, proposals, discussions, and research reports on theological and biblical issues)

THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE GOSPEL? An Analysis of Stephen B. Clark's book, *Man and Woman in Christ*.

By Hal Miller, Ph.D. candidate, Boston College.

When a certain bibliographer can select *Man and Woman in Christ* (Servant Books, 1980, 753 pp., \$15.95) as one of the "most significant" books of the year for evangelicals, it is difficult not to be interested, especially since the relationship of the sexes has been such a pesky issue among us. The same critic even praised it as "of all the multitude of books on this subject . . . easily the best." Having made a fairly serious effort to read some of that multitude, and having found some books I consider quite good, Stephen Clark's book was bound to demand careful scrutiny.

Even if it is not the best of these books on women and men, it is easily the biggest. With 668 pages of text and nearly a hundred more of footnotes, it dwarfs all other works on the subject. The breadth of its project is proportional to its size. It not only examines the biblical texts concerning men and women, but goes to great lengths to contextualize their application in the modern age through a system of men's and women's roles. It is such an ambitious attempt that Clark's characterization of his work as "a book on social roles for men and women" (p. x) has far too modest an appearance. What Clark intends by "social roles" is an all-inclusive set of structures within which to live. His goal is nothing less than a comprehensive sociology for Christian life.

Emil Brunner called the problem of the sexes "the crucial point and fateful question" of Christian anthropology, and Clark's approach shows implicitly that he agrees. Although the center of *Man and Woman in Christ* is the relationship of the sexes, its scope is far broader. Clark's view of women and men spreads rather quickly to touch virtually the whole of social reality. Church structure, the family, the nature of Christian community, and the failures of modern culture are all, he insists, directly related to sexually defined roles.

This vast undertaking is organized into four main sections. The first, which Clark names "The Scriptural Teaching," seeks to explicate the content of the Bible as it touches men and women. Its unified teaching, Clark says, demands that we make a deliberate role differentiation between men and women, and that in these roles, women be subordinate to men. The second section speaks more fully about the "authority" of this teaching, arguing from the unanimity of patristic traditions about the roles of the sexes and discussing the issue of cultural relativity. According to Clark, obedience to biblical authority and attention to the Christian tradition necessitate the subordinate role of women.

Thus far, however, Clark has only shown the authority of the scriptural teaching, not its applicability (p. 366). In the third section, entitled "The Scriptural Teaching in Contemporary Society," he turns to this question. His approach here touches empirical studies in psychology and sociology, as well as philosophical issues. He marshals information from various research to show that sexual differentiation runs deep into the human psyche and throughout human societies. Then he critiques "technological society" and the modern ideologies which hold sway within it. Having decided on the basis of this