

The last things: Reflections on the millennium

by [Carl E. Braaten](#) in the [December 1, 1999](#) issue

The Apostles' creed ends with a statement of Christian belief in "the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." The second article of the Nicene Creed states that Jesus Christ "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." Eschatology, from the Greek word *eschata*, meaning "last things," is the technical word for the Christian vision of the future end and fulfillment of history and the cosmos.

Christianity began as an eschatological faith, but it didn't start from scratch. Eschatology was also a constitutive part of the story of salvation in the Old Testament. The prophets announced the day of Yahweh, the coming of the Messiah, and the new Jerusalem, looking forward to a new and different *future in history*. In the Book of Daniel and in the period between the two testaments Jewish eschatology became apocalyptic. In apocalyptic writings we find visions of a wholly new *future of history*, a new age above and beyond this one.

Jesus's message of the kingdom can best be understood within the milieu of late Jewish apocalypticism. In the world of apocalyptic literature we read about Satan, angels, demons, dragons, aeons, signs of the times, the millennium, cosmic catastrophes, resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, the end of history and the final restitution of all things in God. All these together add up to what the tradition has called "the last things." Who can understand what they mean?

Jesus said, "Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!" In the Apocalypse of John we read, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." Apocalypse means revelation, hence the unveiling of hidden mysteries and meanings. It takes something like apocalyptic imagination to grasp "the things which are above."

There are three unsatisfactory approaches to the "last things": 1) to construct a travelogue or literal timetable of events that will happen soon or in the distant future; 2) to interpret the images as metaphorical expressions of religious experiences and inner states of mind unrelated to real history and the future; 3) to

read apocalyptic literature as social commentary or subversive rhetoric of an oppressed community in times of persecution.

Though there may be some truth in all these approaches, the great tradition of church teaching has controlled eschatology by keeping Christ at the center. The central motif of Jesus's message was the kingdom of God. This was a favorite theme of the social gospel movement; it symbolized social values and political ideals worthy of human striving. Eschatology was reduced to ethics. In that era, Albert Schweitzer gained theological fame by recovering the full eschatological meaning of Jesus's preaching of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is the power of God breaking in upon the present world, not the crowning fulfillment of its progress. It comes on God's own terms, not as a result of human cooperation and calculation.

Jesus began his ministry announcing that the day had come for God to begin his reign, that his kingdom was about to be realized in history. For his Jewish audience this could only mean that the eschaton was at hand. The hope of Israel was that when God comes in the power of his rule, the world will really change. The arrival of God's kingdom will bring a turnabout of all things, putting an end to misery, poverty and even death.

Jesus did not merely announce the coming of a future kingdom, like one of the Jewish prophets. For Jesus the kingdom of God was at once a present reality, functioning in his very person and ministry, and a promise of fulfillment still to come. Then suddenly something surprising happened; Jesus was crushed by the ruling powers of his day. The fulfillment he expected was shattered on the cross. But soon after the crucifixion there arose a core of friends and followers witnessing to the reappearance of the crucified Jesus. This was good news—God had raised Jesus from the grave, a kind of event that Jews expected to happen only at the end of time. Surely, this must be an eschatological occurrence, the beginning of the end. Henceforth, for Christians resurrection hope will be forever founded on the person of Jesus, the Messiah of God, the bringer of the new age. "Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ" (1 Cor. 15:23).

The paradox for Christians is that if the kingdom has already arrived in Jesus, why do things look pretty much the same AD as BC? The hope of Israel was that when the Messiah came, God would at last destroy all resistance to a permanent establishment of peace, justice and freedom. That would spell an apocalyptic transformation of the world. So why, since the Messiah has come, has the world not

changed in a fundamental way?

The answer is that it has; world history has been changed by the missionary proclamation of the church. The good news of the kingdom has been preached throughout the world, the Bible has been translated into every tongue, and churches have been planted among the nations. Somewhat cynically, Alfred Loisy said: "Jesus preached the kingdom of God; but what came was the church." The church was founded at Pentecost as the community of the endtime. The community of believers lives between the times, between the first coming of the Messiah Jesus in the flesh and his final advent in glory. The future eschatological kingdom is already present for those who are in Christ. In worship believers sing of a "foretaste of the feast to come."

The Revelation of John identifies Christ as the One "who is and who was and who is to come" (Rev. 1:4,8). It is noteworthy that the present tense comes first. The risen Christ is really present in the community of believers according to the Spirit. However, the risen Christ is none other than Jesus of Nazareth whose story the Gospels tell. And the crucified Jesus who is the risen Christ will come again in glory to judge the world. Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end of all things, the Lord of history and the cosmos.

The "last things" are not like a runaway train that takes off on its own. Everything must be tethered to Christ. He is the basis of resurrection hope. His is the promise of eternal life. All things will be subject to his judgment in the end. There is no way to the Father's heart except through the Son. All the so-called "last things" cohere in Christ. Faith generates hope that in the end the power that God displayed in raising Jesus from the dead will transform the world and triumph over the forces of sin, death and the devil.

Meanwhile, before the "last things" come to pass, Christ is present in his church as the head of the body. Christ indwells the church by virtue of his Spirit. Under his authority the renewal of the world is under way through the missionary witness of his people. But a struggle is going on between divine and antdivine forces. Even though their days are numbered, Satan and his servants are on the loose, making martyrs of those who witness to the victory of Christ. That is why the church lives in anticipation of the parousia of its Lord, who cries out: "Surely I am coming soon." And the church responds in its eucharistic prayer, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20).

For many today, the images of biblical hope seem to have lost their magnetic pull. The sense of transcendence remains strong enough perhaps to say no to the way things are, but too weak to construct a positive scenario of the future. In modern existentialism only a sense of crisis prevails; nothing but nothingness looms in the future. Marx does offer a revolutionary model of utopian hope—the oppressive system can be changed—but this ideology too has failed. Theologians have looked to biblical eschatology for a hopeful alternative. In doing so they have also worried about whether or how it is still possible and relevant to believe in the eschatology of the Bible.

Can we who live in a secular age governed by a scientific mind-set still share the hopes of the first believers, using their language and idioms? All sorts of interpretive schemes have been tried to purge the Bible of its supposedly naive images of the future. We cannot go into them here, but they have one thing in common—all references to the future are converted to the present. The parousia, the end of the world, the final judgment, the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and everlasting life—all these are understood not as pointing to real events or a real future. Instead they serve merely as signals of transcendence, symbols of existential experience or goads to ethical seriousness.

There is a better way. The time-dimension of the future not only belongs to biblical eschatology, it is also deeply rooted in the structure of human being. Not only are hopes the genes of biblical faith, but hope is essential to meaningful existence. It is to the lasting credit of the "theology of hope" (as developed by Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann) that it discovered the profound connections between biblical eschatology and the phenomenon of hope. Perhaps now is a good time to dust off the old books of the 1960s that reclaimed what the Bible says about the history of promise, resurrection hope, the future of Christ and the end of the world.