

The End of Theology
Reflections on the Eschatological Shape of Theology Today.

When I was one of those considered old enough to have something to say at this convocation I quite naturally found myself asking what I had been pondering which I might speak about before this august assembly. And as I take stock I realize I have been thinking quite a bit of late about eschatology, questions about endings. More particularly I have been not just about eschatology as such, you might say the content of the doctrine, but about the more formal question of the shape which eschatology seems to impose on our theology. So I have decided to deliver myself of some reflections on topic. But a lecture on "The eschatological shape of Theology" did not apparently, seem terribly fetching to those reputed to be something in this enterprise so I finally came up with the more audacious title "The End of Theology." (Now it seems that since my lecture has been shifted to the last spot on the program, the title turns out to be more prophetic than I intended! This is at least one end of theology--for the time being anyway! I might even be tempted to say that I am the end but that might be a bit much!)

Having chosen the title rather frivolously I only later came to realize that I had unwittingly stepped into a veritable quagmire of pronouncements, speculations, and prophecies about the end. It seems that the end of the second millenium has engendered in an otherwise self-satisfied and secure secular culture a sense of foreboding, perhaps even a dread of an impending apocalyptic type disaster. Or is it rather perhaps a sense of relief that at last something is finally over? A piece by Mihir Desai in the New York Times reprinted in the Commentary section of the Star Tribune for Dec 3 demonstrates this

simply by chronicling the host of writings appearing of late announcing the end of just about everything. Just listening to the list is instructive: Bill McKibben in 1989 seems to have started it all with a book on "The End of Nature." Four years later Francis Fukuyama wrote "The End of History and the Last Man." In 1993 architects had a conference on "The end of Architecture." David Lindley announced "The End of Physics"; John Horgan published "The End of Science." Joseph Camilleri and Jim Falk: "The end of Sovereignty; Christopher Wood "The end of Japan Incorporated; Kenichi Ohmae and Jean-Marie Guehenno: The end of the Nation-State; Paul Ormerod: The Death of Economics; Robert Kuttner: The End of Laissez Faire; Jeffrey Madrick: The End of Affluence; Jeremy Rifkin: The End of Work. Mickey Kaus: The End of Equality; Dinesh D'Souza: The End of Racism; Darien McWhirter: The End of Affirmative Action; Niel Postman: The End of Education; Gifford and Elizabeth Pinchot: The End of Bureaucracy; Philip Brown: The Death of Intimacy; Julian Hafner: The End of Marriage; and so on. My goodness, one is tempted to ask, what's left? If we credit these authors just about everything seems to be facing its end with the end of the millenium. Desai, the editorialist thinks this is all a throw-back to America's ancient religious obsession with millenial visions--that as we face the end of the millenium a host of authors are unwittingly drawn into this obsession. Everybody seems eager to declare the end of something. But, Desai says, they seem unable to announce the beginning of anything else! "We are adrift in a sea of endings, waiting for writers who will rescue us with a fresh start." But is that what we have to hope for? Writers? About the only ones who write of the future are people who have to do with computers and cybernetics, like "The Road Ahead" by Bill

Gates and co-writers and all the other promises of the new age of electronics. But I understand that all you are likely to get if you go down that road too zealously is a sore wrist!

Now I have no intention of launching one more relatively pessimistic piece of flotsam or jetsam on this sea of endless endings. Rather I hope there might be some hints for Christians at least of a fresh start. So back to the title. As you no doubt may have come to expect might suspect, the titles I suggest often have a double entendre. "End" here indicates both *finis* and *telos*, both full stop and goal, aim, purpose. And in the business of eschatology the relation between the two is quite subtle. For it is the purpose of eschatology to put an end to us and to "things," both negatively and positively in the living present. Eschatology I take to be the breaking in of the end of the old and the beginning of the new in the crucified and risen Christ.. So the end is both negative and positive. Negative in that it puts a real end to the old and positive in that it gives us an end, a goal, a purpose. To anticipate where I hope to arrive, the end, both the *finis* and *telos*, of theology should be joy and freedom. This should always be the stock in trade of Lutheran theology. Justification by faith alone without the deeds of the law, rightly understood is, of course, a profoundly eschatological doctrine. That is why, taken in its most radical sense, it is so unsettling for us. It is, as a famous book has it, a matter of death and life. Just about my favorite statement in the Book of Concord is from the Smalcald Articles and signals the radical eschatological nature of Justification: "This, then," Luther says, "is the thunderbolt by means of which God with one blow destroys both open sinners and false saints. He allows no one to justify himself." And that is the

end of the matter. The eschaton comes crashing into our lives. Mostly, I suppose, we scurry to get out of the way or to forestall it. How so? The quickest way to get at this fact is to say that when you think eschatologically you begin to understand that there are two ways we try to avoid the crisis of the end. One is the way of what Luther here calls "open sinners." One simply goes one's own way and tries to ignore the impending end. One becomes a secularist, a "this world only-ist". One hopes that there will be no final reckoning. One lives by what Ernest Becker called "the denial of death."

That this way is simply avoidance of the eschatological shape of life is relatively obvious to us. But the most subtle attempt to avoid the crisis of the end is the way of "false saints," those who seek to guarantee their own end by their life of self-chosen piety. God will have none of it. God has an absolute monopoly on the justifying business. It is an eschatological deed. It is a real ending. Something new breaks in upon us. Luther, for one, was quite sure that God--in the end--isn't interested in anything else.

Now, why have I been thinking about this and why do I want to try to talk about it? I think it is because it seems to me that our theology today has become so unbearably pedestrian. It is supposed to fly. But it seems too afraid to risk such flight. It barely walks. And when it does, it limps badly at that. Why is that? It is the thesis of this lecture that it is because we have lost our eschatological fervor, lost the bite of the Biblical and Reformation message. Like Esau we have sold our eschatological birth-right for a mess of this-worldly pottage. Everything we do is turned into this-worldly programs. We tell ourselves we are doing "Kingdom Work" while all we are doing is undermining the Kingdom. Who ever hears talk about eternal life any more? One of the more prevalent

questions I get from students these days is “what do you say when people die?” “Pie in the sky, bye and bye” is the charge bandied about and unloaded on anything smacking of an eschatological hope. I have always thought the best rejoinder to be, ““What’s the matter, don’t you like pie?”” After all, one cheap shot deserves another! And it seems we have grown so sensitive about the charge that we don’t dare talk about eternal life or such things any more. We propose to live as though there were no endings.

Incidentally, it is interesting, and significant for our purposes to track down where the “Pie in the sky” slogan comes from. As far as I have been able to discover it is traceable not to Karl Marx or any of his famous red cohorts but most likely to Joe Hill, propagandist and balladeer for the somewhat IWW. Joe Hill has been celebrated as a martyr in our day in protest songs by Pete Seegar and such. Now Joe Hill, interestingly enough, or should we say typically enough, was a disenchanted Lutheran. His given name was Joseph Hillstrom, born of good conservative Lutheran stock in Sweden but who like the Esaus of this age wandered from the fold, immigrated to this country and was eventually more attracted by the cause of this worldly workers rights than by the eschatological hope of the New Testament. He wrote some new words to the tune of “In the Sweet Bye and Bye” entitled “The Preacher and the Slave,” The verse in question goes, “You will eat, bye and bye/ in that glorious land above the sky; Work and pray, live on hay, you’ll get pie in the sky when you die.” Perhaps Joe Hill is a kind of fore-runner, like Esau a parable of what was to come. Of course, we should not be too hard on Esau. He sold his birth-right because he was tired and hungry. And is not taking care of the body, feeding the hungry here and now a more useful--or at least more attainable pursuit

than hanging onto a birthright as yet unseen? Was not Jesus unheeding and harsh in saying, "The poor you always have with you, but me you have not always?" Or even that we "shall not live by bread alone?"

We need to take stock of ourselves. Where have we arrived today with our quota-riddled bureaucracies, our feverish yearning for political correctness, our pious posturing about social justice and multiculturalism, our temptations to jump on and try to make capital out of every claim to victimization that comes along, our therapeutically sanitized message, our endless fussing over ecumenical consensus building, Jesus seminars designed to make him nice--and quite irrelevant--and so on and on? When I add it all together it usually comes out to one thing: a blatant sell-out of the eschatological Word of the gospel message together with an obscuring of the eschatological shape of that message. Either the message is reduced to mere propaganda for this-worldly possibilities or its proponents make a power move, overstep the fixed eschatological limits and claim an other-worldly legitimation for their claims to which they have no right--as, for instance in all the nonsense today about the ordination of bishops. When it is no longer a matter of truth it becomes a matter of power.

This theological century began, really, with Karl Barth's *Romans*--a profoundly eschatological book. One of the sentences that has burned itself into my psyche is the well-known one about eschatology: "If Christianity be not altogether thoroughgoing eschatology, there remains in it no relationship whatever to Christ." Strong Words! How would we fare today if we were to be measured by that dictum? Where have we arrived now at the end of this century, or even this millenium? Does what we are about bear any

relationship to Christ? Has the century which began with an eschatological bang ended in an ontological whimper? Oh, what we say and do may be Christian-sounding enough, but does it bear the stamp of “thoroughgoing eschatology?” Or is it for the most part once again a capitulation to the Spirit of the Age, a return to seeking our salvation in our ontologies and schemes for justice and what not. If what we have to hope for is the success of our schemes for peace and justice and possibility and self-esteem, we are, I fear, in tough shape indeed.

Barth’s words in Romans, however, echo those of the 19th century historian Franz Overbeck, another wild man who, if he hadn’t caught the apocalyptic bug himself (he liked to consider himself an unbeliever, I recall), at least knew the bug when he saw it.

Overbeck’s pronouncements about the New Testament bothered Barth as he set out on his theological journey. Overbeck was a clear-eyed reader of the New Testament who looked at it and say through to the apocalyptic root of it all. Like Ernst Kaesemann he was able to see that apocalyptic was the “mother of Christian Theology. In that light he looked at the Christianity of his day and came to the conclusion that they really had little if anything to do with one another. Now that in itself is not such a novel operation. Pious folk are always doing that. But usually the attack is a moralistic one, made on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount or the “Teachings of Jesus” or some such. This is the defense of those whom Luther called “false saints.” Their talk is very pious but they don’t want a Jesus whom God has made to be Lord and Christ by raising him from the dead. (Luther once remarked that no man on earth in the natural state wants eternal life, no matter how much he harps on it by pen and tongue. I often wondered why he said that. I think I am

beginning to see. Meeting our maker is a fearsome thought. Better to turn to folks who will assure us there is no such meeting. We seem to have a lot of them running about today. They want a Jesus without eschatology, a Jesus who brings no end and so no beginning. The folk of the Jesus Seminar seem to be the most obvious candidates, of course. Jesus is the great counter-cultural sage who goes about blessing folks with his wisdom--though one can't really be sure he said anything particularly new.

The Atlantic Monthly recently carried a piece on "A Jesus Without Frills," a picture of Jesus based on the so-called "Q" source, a supposed collection of the sayings of Jesus. Of course, such a document has not as yet been found but is thought to be derivable from the gospels by a process of subtraction. A "Jesus Without Frills" means, as you might guess, a de-eschatologized Jesus, a Jesus without the passion, the death, the resurrection, and all such, just a Jesus who wanders about saying wise and provocative things. You know, I remember learning about "Q" in classes from Warren Quance back in my seminary days. That's over forty years ago now--so it doesn't seem particularly new. Some of you will probably remember we used to make jokes on learning about "Q" from Q, or even the rumor that Q had written "Q."

But you know, in spite of all the talk about "Q" I had never, I must admit, actually seen it--or its supposed content--laid out to view. So I took myself down to the Library and with the help of the Bruce Eldevik, our reference Librarian, finally came up with someone's (at least) version of "Q." But what I found was, I can only say, rather frightening. The Jesus of the so-called "Q" sayings is unrelenting in his pronouncements of woe and judgment. I am always leary of people who want to make do with the sayings

of Jesus. I wonder if they have ever read them--yes, even and perhaps especially the Sermon on the Mount. The quickest cure for anyone who wants to find their salvation in the sayings of Jesus is to read them! They are hardly "user friendly" as one says these days. Read "Q" and it is not difficult to see why Jesus had to be crucified! And I fully expect that were Jesus to say again to us what he said then we would do it to him again!

Back to Barth and Overbeck for a minute. The lead essay in Barth's collection called *Theology and Church* was on Overbeck. It bore the title "Unerledigte Anfragen an die Heutige Theologie," translated as "Unsettled Questions for Theology Today." The translation is a bit mild, I think. It ought to be something like "Unanswered Charges Levelled against Today's Theology" or something like that. The New Testament, Overbeck claimed, was not about anything so tame as "revelation in history." Rather it was about "super history," *Urgeschichte* as Overbeck called it, about that in which all of history is enveloped, about the beginning and end of all things, the *Urzeit and the Endzeit*. It was about the apocalypse, the final no to history and this evil and adulterous generation. The announcement was that it shall be burned to a crisp as one can read, for instance, in 2 Peter 3:10 ff: "But the day of the lord shall come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up, Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire, But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."

The Christianity Overbeck saw in his day, was not about such apocalyptic fireworks at all. Christianity was rather the highest form of culture. It was all about this world and its possibilities. Christians were more likely to be interested in postponing or avoiding the day of the Lord than “waiting for and hastening it.” Apocalyptic was to be read, if at all, as a kind of secret code to be decoded by experts and thereby translated into harmless moral and cultural platitudes. The theology that supported this enterprise, Overbeck pronounced, was “The Satan of Religion,” i.e., the one who tempts Jesus with the gift of the whole world if he will only fall down and worship him. Theology, Overbeck said, is the attempt to impose Christianity on the world under the explicitly hallowed garb of modern culture by concealing and even denying its basically apocalyptic character. Theology is the business of misleading people into becoming Christian by making it all “so nice” and positive. (It calls to mind a sign on my Colleague Marc Kolden’s door: God is nice, we should be nice, isn’t that nice?) When the end is ignored we are left with just theological marshmallows.

Well, what of it? Have these unanswered charges coming from an Overbeck via Karl Barth been somehow accommodated or taken care of so they don’t come back to haunt us? I have a hard time ridding myself of the suspicion that they have not, that once again the bite of the apocalyptic and the eschatology the casualty. Is there not, for instance, in the current foo-fer-a over ecumenical affairs and the theology involved an obscuring of the real differences at just this point? Is the supposed catholic oikumene with which we are converging not just another form of “culture?” What are we to say, for example, about bishops? The Reformation declared that a Bishop could be granted jurisdiction “by human

right" (*de jure humano*) but not by divine right (*de iure divino*). That was in essence an solid eschatological sort of distinction. "In the end," only Christ can be the head of the church by divine right. The Kingdom can afford only one King. There was sound gospel reason for that. Put someone else on the throne and there will be big trouble, trouble with the law. It will be come a matter of power, sure as shootin'. But now, it seems, we are ready to push that aside, transgress the eschatological limit and invest our bishops with a power that transcends all such limits. Are we borrowing from an ontological bank where we have no capital to cover an impending bankruptcy?

Is it, again, altogether a great boon that we are now proposing to announce in formal and binding fashion that the mutual condemnations of the Reformation Era no longer strike "today's ecumenical partner? Of course it is "nice" to stop swearing at each other. Pastorally that is a proper thing to do. But what if--just what if--those very condemnations of the Council of Trent, for instance, taken as a whole were at bottom aimed at the eschatological shape implicit in Reformation theology itself. Taken one by one we can perhaps come up with circumlocutions which avoid head-on clashes. But taken as a whole, the unspoken target is an eschatology which spawns a Word that does the end and new beginning to us. That we are set to agree that the condemnations no longer strike us could mean just that the apocalyptic/eschatological fire has simply gone out. Imagine the irony of that! The Fire that was supposed to burn everything to a crisp has gone out. But did it go out or did someone think to be able to put it out? Perhaps we could add another image to Overbeck's derogation of theologians: Theologians are the firemen of the apocalypse, dedicated to putting the fire out so that it will cause at most

only minor damage. But of course if the fire goes out there is no light either. Shall we huddle together in the darkness now and call it "full communion?" Who are we communing with? One another--or God's Christ?

Where is the problem in all of this? In my thinking about the problem I have come to wonder whether the problem is broader than just what appears today. The loss of the eschatological bite of our proclamation seems to be a perpetual temptation. I am of the conviction that our problem has deep roots in the very history of orthodox Christian Theology itself. When I look at the matter from the perspective of eschatology I come more and more to think that we have to go back almost to the beginning, at least to the days of the Gnostic crisis. Gnosticism was, I believe, the greatest crisis for the early church and remains so even up to our time. I suppose it borders on heresy to say it, but it seems to me that it was in the battle with gnosticism right at the outset that theology lost its eschatological shape.

How so? Well, who were the gnostics? What were they about? I have always been attracted to Robert Grant's thesis that the gnostics were disappointed apocalyptikers. This is a highly significant piece of evidence. Gnostics were believers who gave up their hope in the apocalyptic vision. They gave up on the vision of a cataclysmic end of the old age and the advent of a new future. They turned instead to a more ontological view, the idea of an heretofore unheard of gnostic redeemer who comes not to bring a new future, but rather descends from above to awaken and liberate those who have become trapped in this cosmic prison. Instead of looking for a redeemer of and for the future they looked for the redeemer from above. Instead of clash of the two ages they opted for a fatalistic

dualism of spirit versus matter. Apocalyptic dualism is replaced by a metaphysical dualism. So it seems always to be. When you lose faith you take refuge in metaphysics. (Now of course it should be noticed that at bottom nothing much has changed with this replacement. For apocalyptikers one must be found among the righteous to survive. Most gnostics also insisted on an ascetic purging of the flesh. Six of one and half a dozen of the other.) But the replacement of Apocalyptic dualism by metaphysical dualism has its cost, of course, for with it, as we all know, comes the rejection of this world and its creator, Jahwe, together with his "Testament." The redeemer can't really enter the bodiliness of this age. Jesus' humanity is only the temporary disguise of the gnostic "redeemer." In essence the gnostic redeemer is just a teacher like the sage of the Jesus Seminar, or a "Jesus without Frills." Indeed, Jesus not only was not crucified or raised in some gnostic systems, but having changed places with Simon of Cyrene stood by in the crowd ridiculing the whole idea! Perhaps one can say that what the old apocalyptic promised to destroy physically the gnostics destroyed metaphysically. A kind of linguistic destruction is substituted for a more real promised one.

Now this in itself is all old stuff. But the most fateful development for the subsequent history of the Church down to the present day is the "orthodox" reaction to the gnostic schematic. Quite naturally, of course, they rejected gnosticism and its fatalistic dualism. But now what is of utmost significance for the future shape of theology is the way in which this was done. My suspicion is that it was done too much by attempting to meet the gnostics on their own ground, i.e., by a move to an ontology by which they hoped to meet the challenge of gnostic dualism (e.g. as in Origen particularly). Or

perhaps one could say that it was a kind of synthesis of biblical teaching and hellenistic ontology in which the more egregious elements of gnosticism were simply countered by the Biblical Word. Thus, as in Irenaeus, the "false gnosis" was confronted and refuted by the "true gnosis"--perhaps an early form of "pure doctrine."

So out of the gnostic crisis emerged a kind of Christian Gnosis. Jahwe was reinstated as the one and only Creator and God. The Old Testament was rescued as a Christian book, even if that meant that it had to be interpreted spiritually to cover over its more embarrassing features. Creation, incarnation, and the two-natures doctrine countered the disparagement of this worldly reality. Free choice was set in place as defence against gnostic fatalism, and so on and on. A corpus of "orthodox" doctrine emerged to shape the Christian Church. It is, of course, an over-generalization to say it, but what developed was a kind of Christian gnosis to rival that of gnosticism itself.

Now I suppose it has to be granted that this kind of move is entirely understandable, indeed, even necessary given the circumstances. The ultimate cost, however, was staggering. For the real casualty in the end, was eschatology. The fight against metaphysical dualism meant that the eschatological dialectic of new versus old simply suffered eclipse along with it. Anything "new" was immediately suspect. What was left of eschatology was relegated to the end of the dogmatics book. It had to do with "the last things," but not with anything of immediate or pressing concern. It did not, that is to say, itself impart or impress a shape on the theology of the church.

Now here, before we proceed it is necessary to stop and make a distinction between apocalyptic and eschatology so as to separate out those promises which are part

of the basic Christian hope from those that are not. Apocalyptic, it appears to me, was a view of the world and its end that existed prior to and without Jesus. It could get along perfectly well without him. Its problem consequently was that it had no way of bringing redemption into the present. It could only await the future cataclysmic destruction of the age and theorize about who and by what means one might be accounted righteous enough to survive. So arose the split between the righteous and the sinners evident in the New Testament. Jesus, who came not call the righteous but sinners, was ultimately an offence and a threat to a true-blue apocalyptic. (Cf. the relationship to John the Baptist: "Are you he who is to come or are we to look for another?") So the gnostics, the disappointed apocalypticers, accepted Jesus but used him as part of their world-denying scheme. Redemption still does not become a present revelatory occurrence, but only a secret rescue of the truly spiritual gnostic.

Eschatology, on the other hand, is Christian faith's assessment of what happens in and through the very humanity of Jesus, indeed, what happens to him at our hands, the end of the old and the beginning of the new breaking out and into our present through the proclaimed word and sacrament.

That eschatology became a casualty early on was fateful in every aspect of theology and the church's life. Virtually everything is affected. Obviously time does not permit here the opportunity to begin to support such outrageous generalizations. You will just have to take my word for it that I think I could do it. But the over-all result is the kind of thing I was speaking of at the beginning--that with the loss of eschatology everything gets transmuted into pedestrian this-wordly possibilities and projects.

Salvation is shifted from the eschatological hope to some sort of ontological continuity. Instead of beings who "have been crucified with Christ," so that "it is no longer I that live, but Christ," we come to look upon ourselves as continuously existing beings to whom only minor or what Aristotle would call "accidental" changes occur. Fall is an accidental change (remember when they argued about that at the time of the reformation?) and consequently so is redemption. "Conversion" we call it, or perhaps some kind of "transformation." Always some continuity must be preserved, usually in the understanding of free will. It can't be completely lost in the fall, and so it must be considered partly operative in conversion, and then of course come into full and glorious display in sanctification. And so on and so on. The church and its ministry take on ontological trappings. In the fashion of pseudo-Dionysius the church on earth mirrors the one in heaven. Ministers must be ranged in appropriate hierarchies to reflect the proper ontological order and be invested with the power they supposedly are to wield. Instead of ranks of gnostic aeons we have ecclesiastical orders. Perhaps gnostic aeons were better. At least they stayed in heaven where they could do us no particular harm! It also seems to me that we ought to stop making the distinction between the church "militant" here on earth and the church "triumphant" yonder in heaven. There isn't any church in heaven. If there is I ain't goin! The book of Revelation promises us, at least, that there will be no temple there. Paul promises that prophecy and tongues and all of that will finally cease! Now there's a real eschatological promise for you." After the church "militant" is not still more church, but the Kingdom of God, which, as Luther reminds us "comes indeed of itself," even "without our prayer."

Perhaps most fateful of all, however, was the problem of the interpretation of scripture. Gnostics, I think we must say, were honest enough to see that the scriptures of the young church, particularly the Old Testament and its God, could not be assimilated to their moral and ontological scheme. So they just rejected the Old Testament. Marcion went even farther and edited out much of the New Testament as well. It was in many ways an honest answer to the problem. It didn't fit the ontology, throw it out.

But this put a church minded to meet gnosticism on its own ground in a delicate position. If they were to hang on to the Old Testament, how were they to interpret it? The answer? They carried forward a kind interpretation already begun by Plato, Philo, and other ontologists, they "spiritualized" it, interpreted it "symbolically." They made a distinction between the literal historical sense and the spritual or transcendent sense. Scripture, that is, didn't mean what it appeared to mean literally, but it really meant--if it is not too nasty to say it--what it ought to mean spiritually, i.e., according to the going ontology of spirit. Scripture itself, that is to say, was interpreted not according to the eschatological dialectic of old and new, death and life, that came to fruition in Jesus, but according to the more ontological scheme of the material, sensible, versus the spiritual and intelligible. One is always looking behind the scenes for a word that is more fitting to one's "intelligible" world. The enterprise launched way back there is still going on!

Now every method of interpretation, every hermeneutic, to use the modernism, is an implicit soteriology. Where words are more or less a secret code, where they are taken to be a mysterious symbol system, the interpreter becomes the acting subject. Everything devolves finally on the "free choice" of the self as the acting subject. It is not the Word

that acts on the self but the continuously existing self that must act upon the word. The eschatological shape of theology is denied and we are effectively closed to its influence.

Now the Reformation, I think we can say, was the breaking of the new eschatological dawn with its attempt to reassert the nature of the Word as killing letter and life giving spirit. In other words, the Reformation, at least at the outset recognized just what the gnostics claimed: the Word of God is indeed an offense to this age. But that is just what it is supposed to be! The literal word, the history of God with His people ends in the cross and spells finally one thing: the death of the old. Only then can there be a new beginning. The Word takes on its eschatological shape and function. Nevertheless, if one takes a broad historical perspective I think one would have to say that the Reformation was at best something of an interlude in the story, an interlude in which the eschatological sunshine broke out with promise but, alas, was soon beclouded again. What emerged from Luther's struggles with scripture was an eschatological use of the Word and the preaching of it. They didn't use the word "eschatology" then, of course, but Luther particularly intuited the eschatological shape of the New Testament message. Indeed, there is a healthy portion of modern scholarship demonstrating the apocalyptic flavor and fervor of Luther's theology. The dualities in Luther's theology bear eloquent witness to that: God hidden and revealed; law and gospel; kingdom on the left and on the right; old and new being; death and life and so on. The eschatological break runs right through every theological locus. This is indication of a concerted attempt to restore the eschatological shape of theology. I suppose a good share of my theological life has been

spent trying to demonstrate that and what it means for us so I won't belabor the fact more here.

But alas, it appears that it was only an interlude. Of course the Reformation spawned churches in their own right. But the question for this essay is, "Did they become bearers and preachers of the eschatological word? Perhaps. Here and there. Now and again. That Word has indeed come down to us by God's grace. But, it seems, something there is that doesn't love the eschatological Word. It is, I suppose too much for the old age to take. An unconditional gospel promise will always be suspected of fostering all sorts of theological and ethical mayhem. Quietism, formlessness, antinomianism, cheap grace, social irresponsibility, moral laxity, so on and so on. All the ills of the contemporary scene will sooner or later be blamed on the gospel, or some distorted form of it. "Now that the gospel has come," Luther quipped, "Men have learned the fine art of blaming all the evils of the world on it! As if these evils were not in the world before the gospel! Just as men blame education for the fact that as education spreads their own ignorance is exposed!" In another instance, reflecting on the reception of the gospel in the world Luther remarked, "They fled this morning star as though their lives depended on it!" The story of theology since the time of the Reformation is, all things considered, largely the story of that flight. I leave that statement unsubstantiated for the time being but suggest, if there is objection, simply that you look around. And the big question for us is, are we still running? But perhaps even that is too strenuous a metaphor. Perhaps we have just slowed to a walk or settled in for a nap. After all, where theology has no end there is no fear of God.

But what then is the end of theology? It is, of course, the new age held fast in the joy, the *hilaritas*, as Luther could say, of faith. One of my pastor friends who knows what this is about, I think, says that in his experience too often pastors have no joy in the gospel. That is the tragedy. The fire has to be rekindled. If there is a road ahead theologically it must lie, I believe, in recapturing and working out more thoroughly the eschatological shape of theology, a theology that issues eventually in a forthright proclamation of the eschatological word announcing the end and new beginning. If we do not do this we only succumb in one way or another to the powers of this age. The battle with gnosticism is a prime example of this on the theological level. The problem was that in the battle we became too much like the enemy we fought.

A word which might well stand over our reshaping of theology is that from Ephesians 6:11-12, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood but against the principalities (*archa*), against the powers (*exousias*), against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." The contention in which we will find ourselves engaged, that is, is not with obvious enemies, not with those "open flesh-and-blood sinners" Luther mentions, but rather with "false saints," highly placed, powerful and esteemed spiritual forces, with *arche*, fundamental or spiritual first principles. It is a question of what really drives us. It is a contention against the wiles of the devil. And anyone who knows anything about such battles knows that we can't win on our own, not without what Ephesians calls "the whole armor of God." Without that, one only becomes, in the end, just like the enemy, under the

principality, the arche, of this worldly power (exousia). We may set out in righteous indignation to beat the devil by expunging the witches of society but end only by killing innocent people. So we do the devil's bidding after all. And so it goes. The pacifist and freedom fighter all too easily becomes a terrorist. Do we really think we will be any safer when the arche shifts from power to terror? Or is there any difference? Revolution against the *arche* of "the establishment" or "class privilege" becomes a privileged establishment itself and ends by killing its own children. So it goes with virtually every revolution. The reign of David ended in the profligacy and corruption of Solomon and the sorry history of subsequent Kings. The Maccabean revolt issued in corruption worse than that of its predecessors. Something of the same happened with the Zealots. The same with the French revolution, the communist revolution, the fascist revolutions and so on endlessly. Isn't it ironic that many Christians used to (and perhaps many still do) celebrate the communist revolution almost as the coming of the Kingdom of God! Millions and millions of people killed by the "peoples" revolution. Think of it! When we are up against the *archa* of this age its always "heads I win, tails you lose." I expect that is why Satan is called the prince of this world. He is the arche! No matter which way we turn, which this worldly arche attracts us, however "spiritual," we can't win. For we wrestle not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers, against world rulers of this present darkness, spiritual hosts of wickedness in high places. The battle at bottom is a spiritual one. It is a question of the *archa*!

This is "in the end" the question for us in the church in thinking on the eschatological shape of theology. Where are we with all our projects and programs?

What is the arche that impels us, for instance, in our ecumenical efforts--which efforts are likely to be most significant of all for the future shape of the Church? Are we clear that only the truth itself, Jesus Christ, establishes unity? Are we clear that unity cannot be established by the churches somehow moving toward each other--that is quite a different arche--but only through the all churches moving toward the truth of Jesus Christ, there to find each other in the truth? Do we listen to the Jesus who announces in his trial before the representative of this worldly arca, "I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth," or do we find ourselves more sympathetic to Pilate asking, "What, after all, is truth?" Does anybody know? Isn't it all relative? But if the question of truth is suspended for the sake of unity, unity becomes simply another ideology, it becomes one of those arche, it possesses us, impels us and exerts a strange force, an exousia which drives us to pay virtually any price. So we are driven toward "visible unity," so as to get what we call "full communion." But with whom? With ourselves?

When the ideology of unity is the arche truth is subordinated to power. The church becomes its own arche. The communion has to be authorized and controlled by those who have the exousia. Its usefulness will be directed toward its worldly relevance and efficiency in this world. We will commune with one another and meanwhile the idea that it is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, ultimate union with the coming one fades into oblivion. (Yes, I still persist in singing "May feast in paradise with thee" even if everyone else piously supposes that "May strengthened for thy service be" is going to accomplish anything! I have always thought a feast in paradise a more inspiring and joyous possibility!)

And that I fear is only a paradigm for what happens in the life of the church in general. I confess that when "Headquarters (a euphemism for arca?) "sends out its pronouncements or the preacher goes into the peroration in the end--or sometimes in the beginning as well--about social justice and political advocacy and all the latest causes, a deep depression settles over me. And of course I wonder why and even feel a little bit guilty about it because the causes seem generally--though not always--such worthy ones, causes which I myself, indeed, support. But I have come to suspect more and more of late that the cause of my depression rests with the matter of the arca. In much of what we do it seems to me I get the tell-tale whiff of a different arche. It seems as though we assume that when we get on to all those grand and pious programs of ours we have gotten to the real business of the church (even if it turns out to be mostly talk). Oh, we can give a little theology a lick and a promise, as in "The Lutheran," as long as it isn't more than a page or so or too complicated, but then we can get on with what really matters! What is the arche? That is the question. Are we simply falling in line with the latest of the world's projects, even the most worthy ones, in order to justify our existence? Are we still perhaps gnostics of a sort, disappointed apocalyptikers who have given up hope and so undertaken to translate our endeavor into more idealist projects?

Battling the arca, it is evident, is an extremely subtle business. But that, I believe, is what eschatology is all about. Eschatology embraces the fact that Jesus Christ, crucified and risen is the end of us, the goal and telos of theology. He breaks into our lives in proclaimed word and sacrament, puts the old to death and raises up the new. We owe ourselves finally to no other arche than Jesus the Lord. His Kingdom, as he announces to

Pilate, one of the representatives of this-worldly arche, is not of this world. (When Pilate claims to have the power, the exousia, to release Jesus or to crucify him, Jesus simply replies that he has no power but that given him from above). Whatever we have to do here is strictly "left-handed" work, as Luther would say. When I was searching for an appropriate designation for all of this I came upon the idea of anarchy--being without an arche. As far as this world is concerned with all its archa, secular and churchly, we are perhaps best called "anarchists," ones who own up to no worldly arche. "Here we have no abiding city, but look for that which is to come. The very idea of anarchy is, of course, shocking to us and because of its history considered highly dangerous. But perhaps that only shows how much we are attached to the archa of this age. We can't conceive of someone without an arche. But eschatology is the end. And surely that means in the first instance, a profound detachment from this world and its projects and all its archa--that freedom of the inner man that Luther talked of in his tract on the freedom of the Christian--"free Lord of all and subject to none." If the thought of an anarchy inspired by eschatology doesn't bring a smile to your face you probably can't be saved anyway. We are reaching out here, you see, for the joy, the hilaritas, of faith. No less a person that Jacques Ellul, for instance, likes to call himself a Christian anarchist. There is a kind of maverick theologian by the name of Vernard Eller who has written an interesting book entitled "Christian Anarchy." He says that among the Main-line ("magisterial") Reformers Luther comes the closest to being an anarchist. Of course Luther protects himself by giving penultimate authority to the offices in the kingdom on the left. But they are not our hope. Luther's writings on the place of such authority abound in passages which really of

of an anarchist flavor. Consider, for instance, the following: (From Stayer, Anabaptism and the Sword, 33-44.)

See, these people (the Christians) need no worldly Sword or law. And if the whole world were true Christians--genuine believers, I mean--no prince, king, lord, Sword, or law would be necessary or useful. (On Temp Auth. to what extent...WA 249:36-250:1; LW 45:89.)

The temporal authority does not at all belong to the charge of Christ but is an external thing, like all other offices and estates. WA 12:331 Sermon on Matt 18

...The temporal power is but a very small matter in the sight of God, and too slightly regarded by him for us to resist, disobey, or become quarrelsome on its account no matter whether the state does right or wrong." (On Good Works LW 44:93. WA 6, 259:33 ff). Such an order we must have, but it is not a way to get to heaven and the world will not be saved because of it, but it is necessary exactly to keep the world from getting worse. (WA 12, 675:19)

Dominion and kingship shall remain to the Last Day, but then all official powers will be abolished, both the temporal and the spiritual. (WA 36: 578-579; LW 28, 131-2??

"Both the temporal *and the spiritual*." And that, I take it, is the end even of theology! Here the goal and the telos break in upon us because the grip of this-worldly arche is broken by the confidence that Kingdom of God shall come by God's power in God's good time. The liberal dream that we are somehow going to bring in the Kingdom by our

efforts seems to be enjoying a late blooming in our circles. But it belongs surely to our eschatology to declare that the Kingdom is God's and shall come by God's power alone. We would do well to ponder once again Luther's remarkable explanations to the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. Thy Kingdom come: The Kingdom of God comes of itself, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also come to us..., Thy will be done: the good and gracious will of God is done without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also be done by us. Give us this day our daily bread. God indeed gives daily bread without our prayer, even to all the wicked...but we pray that we may receive it with thanksgiving. We are not in the business of bringing in the Kingdom. There ought to be a big sign on the Kingdom of God: Keep out! God at work! Coming soon, but in the meantime, mind your own business! And if it is true that theology is our business for time being at least we can rest assured that it too will have an end. And won't that be grand?