

Diakonia Program – Northern Illinois Synod ELCA

Christian Doctrine

Session 5, Segment A The Doctrine of End Things (Eschatology)

- I. Opening Devotions
- II. A Caution & Many Problems
 - a. Because the power of death is strong, we all work hard to deal with it, though sometimes by denying it all together. The Christian understanding of resurrection, death, and things of the “end” can actually shake culturally held beliefs about what happens when we die, when the world ends. Yet, it is the Christian faith that provides hope grounded in something beyond metaphysical speculation, beyond what rises from our fear of our own end. Christian faith is grounded in the resurrection of our Lord and the love of the Triune God.
 - b. The end. Answers to the biggest questions of faith are about The End: The end of history, the end of the world, the end of time, the end of life for one or for all.
 - c. Christian understandings of “The End” are broader than individual death. Questions about the cosmic, historical, created order are also essential.
 - d. Individualism of our age skews our thinking and attention to “The End” by centering on individual death over relationships, history, community, and the cosmos.
 - e. Cultural influences from many places (Greek philosophy, pagan religion, heresies, to name a few) shape some of the ways we think of matters of The End, often without any root in the Christian Gospel of Triune God.
 - f. The Problem Today:
 1. On the one hand: *“What is going to happen to me when I die and afterwards? Where can I find enduring certainty in my living and my dying? ...”*
 2. On the other hand: *... if Christian hope is reduced to the salvation of the soul in heaven beyond death, it loses its power to renew life and change the world, and its flame is quenched; it dies away into no more than a Gnostic yearning for redemption from this world’s vale of tears.” (Pg xv, The Coming of God, Jurgen Moltmann)*
 3. While the Bible is a book of hope throughout, especially in apocalyptic literature like Revelation, the role of this literature suffered under the advance of modernity. In place of a view of history where God was the power of the future, the Enlightenment set the idea of “inevitable human progress.”
 4. Inevitable progress has been (and continues to be) unmasked as a deception.

“After two devastating world wars, the Holocaust, the development of nuclear weapons, the ominous signs of ecological disaster, and powerful movements of social unrest and revolution in many parts of the world, the idea of gradual but inevitable progress in history now seems pure fantasy.” (Migliore 332)

5. The collapse of our own progress has led us to despair and a search for answers. Unfortunately, the “Christian” message has often been doom instead of hope. We hear about those to be “Left Behind” and see an obsession with mysterious signs of Armageddon to come.
6. This “neo-apocalypticism” (as Migliore calls it) is understandable in light of the apparent unraveling of the world today and the lack of attention to an orthodox treatment of a faithful eschatology. This movement is deficient in that it:
 - a. Reads Scripture in a distorted way, ignoring the gospel message, the ministry death & resurrection of Jesus; trivializes the context addressed by scripture.
 - b. Removes Christians from any active place in the unfolding reign of God – encourages a welcome of disaster. Promotes a detachment because we escape (escapism).
 - c. Needs an “Us and Them” – no solidarity with creation or humanity.
 - d. *“Eschatology is torn away from the person and work of Christ. Armageddon replaces Golgotha. Faith, love, and hope are severed. The church will be safe in heaven when all hell breaks loose.” (Migliore 337)*

III. The Four Horizons of Eschatology

- a. It is hope in God for God’s glory.
- b. It is hope in God for the new creation of the world.

Romans 8:19-23 ¹⁹ *For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God;* ²⁰ *for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope* ²¹ *that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.* ²² *We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now;* ²³ *and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.*

- c. It is hope in God for the history of human beings with the earth.

Matthew 6:10 Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

- d. It is hope in God for the resurrection and eternal life of human people.

John 5:24 Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.

IV. Resurrection and Eternal Life

a. Summary of Scriptural Treatments

1. Death is temporal end of life
2. Death is loss of community with God
3. Death & Sin – result of sin or natural death
4. Death's annihilation or Death's transformation?

"Having fallen into sin and brought upon themselves the enmity between humans and wild beasts, the sweat of the brow by which living must be arrested from nature, pain in childbirth, and all manner of suffering, the last thing one would want to add to this list is that it will all go on forever. It is out of love, then, that God separates us Adam and Eve from the tree of life. Death is a gift of divine grace because it marks the point at which consequences for sin come to an end. There is no suffering beyond the grave. Death is the door that God slams shut on evil and suffering within creation...In light of Genesis 3 and in light of Easter, it seems that death plays an important role in the divine plan of salvation... Death can be evaluated according to either the law or the gospel. According to the law it is our just deserts for acting sinfully. According to the gospel, it is a gift that opens the door to an everlasting life free of the sufferings we undergo in this life." (Peters 322-23)

b. Immortality of the Soul vs. Resurrection

"The history of European thought offers us two images of hope in the face of death: the image of the immortal soul, an image cherished by the ancient world; and the Bible's image of resurrection of the dead. In the first image we have self-assurance of the invulnerable soul; in the second faith's assurance that God will create new life out of death. Whereas the one puts trust in the self-transcendence of the human being, the other relies on God's transcendence over death. (Moltmann 58)

"We really do die and cease to exist. We will not be saved by a heroic soulechtsomy, that is, by extracting an immaterial soul from our material body. Sin is a cancer that eats away at the totality of human existence, leaving no organ, whether physical or spiritual, uninfected. The resulting death means true extinction." (Peters 323)

1. Immortal souls are immune from death and exist beyond birth and death. We avoid material being. We don't need resurrection.

2. Who are we really? Who am I apart from my physical existence? What of science finding more and more connections between mind and body?

3. Immortal souls depend on self. Resurrection depends on the grace of God.

“The immortality of the soul is an opinion — the resurrection of the dead is a hope. The first is trust in something immortal in the human being, the second is a trust in the God who calls into being the things that are not, and makes the dead alive. ... The immortal soul may welcome death as a friend, because death releases it from the earthly body; but for the resurrection hope, death is the last enemy (1 Cor. 15.26) of the living God and the creation of his love.” (p. 65-66, Moltmann).

4. Resurrection life allows us to live and love to the fullest, without disdain or rejection of life, history, world, cosmos.

Humans don't have to: “try to cling to their identity through constant unity with themselves, but will empty themselves into non-identity, knowing that from this self-emptying they will be brought back to themselves again for eternity.” (P 67, Moltmann)

5. Reincarnation robs us of personhood, denigrates this life, and throws us into the unforgiving arms of karma, where we get what we deserve.

c. Where are the Dead?

1. “In heaven” is a vague answer unless we can define heaven in a way that does not denigrate earth, time, and the creation. Heaven can sometimes be held to be a kind of “immortal soul of the world.” In which case it suffers the same fate as the concept of the immortal soul. Yet, it is important for us to know where the dead are.

“I want to know where the dead are, and how I can hold on to my community with them. Are they sleeping, body and soul in their graves, and will they sleep until the resurrection of the dead? Are their souls in the intermediate state of purgatory...? Are they already risen...?” (p 96, Moltmann)

2. Heaven as God's future.

3. Second Coming implies present absence

4. Living and dead await Gods future.

5. The dead are “in Christ” who alone bridges the chasm between life and death.

“The fellowship of Christ consists of two semi-circles, so to speak. The one is the community of the living, the other the community of the dead... The common hope for the future of eternal life and the new creation binds us together.” (p. 106-107, Moltmann)

d. Death, Sin, and the Unfinished Life

1. We are not what God intended.
2. Life is full of brokenness, regret.
3. Often life is savaged by powers beyond us — sickness, premature death, violent ends, wasted moments.

“However we imagine eternal life, it cannot be the externalization of our beginnings, our attempts at life, and life’s abrupt endings, experienced or willed.... What it does mean is being given a chance to become the persons God meant us to be.” (p116-117, Moltmann)

“I think, according to what the gospel suggests, that I will have to re-suffer much and re-live much, will have to bemoan much that was neglected; but I shall not perish of it all, because God’s goodness will hold me fast. I think I will have to suffer a transformation into the one I was really destined to be until... harmony with nature and will of God is finally attained, and the forgiveness takes place that must be pronounced.... Until God says: it’s all right, everything is all right. Now come and fill the place and take up the tasks intended for you, for the great future of my kingdom.” (Moltmann, quoting Jorg Zink, p. 117)

e. Eternal Life

1. A present reality empowered by the revelation of God’s future
2. Taking my place, though understood partly, now.
3. Living in anticipation of the fullness of God
4. Living without worry about justifying myself or my soul — trusting God alone.
5. A life and death, directed to and pulled into God’s future fulfillment of all things
6. A life deeply connected to creation, history and taking a place within each.
7. A life, which through God’s power alone, will unite us with the new creation, the redemption of history.
8. A life which accepts the judgment of God as a refining fire, a becoming, that will lead to becoming who and what we were created to be.
9. Submitting to God’s judgment as an act of faith in life in anticipation of God’s final shaping of my life.

V. Break

Session 5, Segment B
The Doctrine of End Things (Eschatology) - Continued

I. Hope, History, and Cosmos

a. My End as a Moment in History

“Personal hope in the face of one’s own death and beyond is certainly the beginning of (discussion of end things), when the Spirit lays hold of people personally, and makes the living people. But as beginning, it is an integral component of the universal hope for the whole creation in its present misery. Eternal life is ‘the life of the world to come’, as the Nicene Creed says, so it means not just human life but the life of all the living — of ‘all flesh’ as the Bible puts it.” (Moltmann 131)

b. The End

1. A dissolution of things past and present
2. A fulfillment of things to come
3. Future is already and not yet
4. Death is the beginning—Bonhoeffer

II. Symbols of The End

a. The *Parousia* – The Second Coming

1. Hope in “*someone, not in things or ideas.*” (Migliore 342)
2. The Future is not completely veiled; we have seen it in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.
3. What we now know is “seen darkly” limited in scope.
4. This happens in history and is cosmic in scope. History is consummated in this event and the cosmos is impacted by its advent.

b. Resurrection of the Dead

1. It is a resurrection of the whole person – soul, mind, body.
2. It is then necessarily a resurrection of all: “*If God’s promise includes the body, then it also embraces society, the body politic, and indeed the entire cosmos with which our bodies are so intimately bound up.*” (Migliore 344)
3. The living and the dead and the yet to be born – ultimate inclusion “*communion that spans all space and time.*” (Migliore 344)

c. Last Judgment

1. ALL shall be - or have been judged by God

“I would suggest that we try to think of the final judgment as a single act of God that begins on Calvary and concludes on the last day. Our entire existence is found amid this one inclusive act of God.... (Judgment) is not for the purpose of determining

each person's destiny. That will have been already determined prior to physical death. The purpose is rather to reveal the justice and sovereignty of God.”(Peters 329)

“The final sifting needs to take place so that one can clearly see what has been the case all along. In short, the final judgment is and act of revelation more than an act of salvation.” (Peters 330)

2. The Judge is a Savior – *“the very same Christ who was crucified and raised for us will also be our judge on the final day. We are not confronted now with a gracious, forgiving Lord but then with a vengeful vindictive judge.” (Migliore 345)*
3. The criterion of judgment is revealed in the love of the cross.
“...the criterion of judgment, now and then, is nothing other than the self-giving, other-including love of God decisively made known in Jesus Christ... the question we will have to answer will be something like this: In response to God's superabundant mercy shown to us, have we shown mercy, or only loved ourselves.” (Migliore 345)
4. Judgment is a theme of scripture
5. Judgment (eternal damnation) is a popular motivation for religious piety.
6. Universalism vs. “Some of us make it and some don't”
7. Judgment as process of redemption — the cross – which precedes parousia, and is unbound by death.

d. Heaven

1. *“It does not refer to geographically remote region to which disembodied souls fly when released from their anchor on earth. It is present here and now amid bodily life in a proleptic way. It will be present here fully when the ultimate future - the kingdom of God - is finally established.*

e. Eternal Life/Death

1. Life in “heaven” is full participation in the Triune life of God.
2. That reign has its provisional example in the Church
3. Not eternal sleep, but an abundant sacramental life because God is “all in all.”
4. Hell – *“wanting to be oneself apart from God's grace and in isolation from others. Hell is that self-chosen condition in which, in opposition to God's agapaic love and the call to a life in mutual friendship and service, individuals barricade themselves from others.” (Migliore 347)*

Session 5, Segment C

Salvation in Light of the End

I. Is Salvation for All?

- a. The Bible is not always at unity with itself — does this bother us?
- b. Scripture develops over time, and understanding of the Christ event develops as well. Mark is the most “primitive” gospel—John the most developed.
- c. The Bible offers three basic views of salvation:
 - i. *“First the New Testament seems to say that salvation will only apply to some people and not others on the grounds that one must have faith in order to be saved. Saint Paul says salvation is for “everyone who has faith” (Rom. 1:16). Do such passages imply that those without faith are condemned to everlasting perdition? If so, then salvation is by no means universal.*
 - ii. *Second, a double destiny is clearly articulated by those passages that claim that salvation is dependent on virtuous works we perform. The most forceful statement of this position is Jesus’ parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25. Faith and unbelief are not mentioned in this passage. Only good works determine if a person goes to heaven or not.*
 - iii. *There is a third category of passages that tend to support the position of universal salvation. These so emphasize that salvation is dependent on God’s grace and not on human works that all conditions are precluded. Paul repeatedly emphasizes that we are saved by grace. “It is a gift from God” (Eph. 2:8; Rom 3:24). God’s grace is universal. It knows no bounds. Christ “died for all” (2 Cor. 5:15) (Peters, 367)*
 - iv. *“It appears that we have three irreconcilable positions... Salvation depends upon 1) whether or not we have faith; 2) whether or not we love our neighbor; 3) neither of the above, because salvation is totally a free gift of God’s grace... Based on all I have said above, I think most favorable of the third alternative, a universalist interpretation of sola gratia.” (367)*

II. A Lutheran, Orthodox Position Rooted in Grace

- a. Love and Grace are the cornerstone—*“...a focus on divine love and grace would lead to offering two complimentary hypotheses. First, salvation will be universal — that is, it has been given in Christ and will be applied to all human beings regardless of their sinful behavior on earth. Second, hell, if it does exist now, cannot last forever, Only God’s kingdom is everlasting.” (368)*
- b. If some sin can exclude us forever from God’s grace, any sin can and we are lost.
- c. How powerful is God? — *“If hell were to remain forever, it would also remain*

as a constant reminder that God's will is not completely done, that God's power is less than complete. Therefore, hell, if it exists, must be temporary, and once it passes out of existence all will be taken into the consummate kingdom of God.” (368)

- d. How loving is God? — *If God's love is capable of extending grace and forgiveness even to those most detestable to God, then it seems that this love would effect the elimination of hell. This, to posit that God uses omnipotent power to establish a place of everlasting torment and suffering as retribution for sin would appear to draw a limit to God's gracious loving” (369).*
- e. When shall the suffering end? — *“Just as God so loved the world (John 3:16), so also do those who love God groan in travail (Rom. 8:22) in behalf of the healing of all things... This implies universal salvation and an end to hell. How? Suppose heaven were populated with persons who genuinely love others just as God first loved us. (Because of the solidarity of all creation in God/Christ) If they loved sympathetically, they too would feel the pain of the damned. It is intrinsic to the nature of love that it be complete and whole. Partial fulfillment — fulfillment for oneself while others remain unfulfilled — runs contrary to the very nature of the love that we believe we have been bequeathed by God. In short, heaven could not be heaven if there existed a hell alongside it.” (370)*
- f. Salvation must be seen as a process which finds its fulfillment in the consummation of the kingdom announced by Jesus. Crabby people eventually smile — Dan Erlander.
- g. We must allow God to save us by grace, and then must let God save the world by the same grace.
- h. Like law serves gospel now, hell, punishment, judgment are penultimate realities that serve the good news of God.

III. What of Other Religions? A Variety of Approaches

a. Replacement

- 1. Christ is the only means to encounter God and be saved. No other religion has intrinsic revelatory or salvific value.

b. Fulfillment

- 1. Other religions may be revelatory, may lead to an encounter with the law, but salvation and gospel are found only in Christ (Carl Braaten)
- 2. Other religions are *“preparations for the reception of the fullness of the truth of the Christian gospel.”* Recognition of the values of other religions and a call for dialogue and collaboration. (Vatican II)
- 3. *“Anonymous Christians”* – God wills all persons to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4). Saving grace of Christ within other religions. (Rahner)

4. Christians are Christians, saved in Christ. We cannot speak to the way in which God works in other religions with definite certainty, we must be open to the work of God in others. (Lindbeck & Barth)

c. Mutuality

1. Dialogic necessity. Giving and receiving on both sides of the dialogue. Proponents "*would affirm the universal saving significance of Christ, but each would also claim that our knowledge of Christ and salvation in him is augmented, corrected, and to some extent completed in the encounter with other religions.*" (Migliore 313)

d. Acceptance

1. God, not Christ, must be central. Christians have encountered God in Christ. Holding what religions have in common.
2. Does not give away the core of reality of the cross as a means of witnessing to all.

II. Judaism

a. The Sins of the Past

1. Church supersedes Israel
2. Inquisitions and Holocaust

b. Grafting instead of Replanting

1. Paul – Romans 9-11
2. Children of Abraham – Christ opens the doors to the Gentiles
3. Trinity demands that we not forget the Exodus

III. Witness in the World

- a. People of Christ must be confident that a Trinitarian God is at work beyond the scope of the Church – even when not recognized.
- b. Dialogue that leads to understanding and connections, not to compromise.
- c. Common concerns of humanity are at the root of our dialogue

Session 5 Bibliography

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