

All Things New: Invited To God's Future

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EVANGELISM AND ESCHATOLOGY

If we want to know our human future we read the newspaper. Whoever wants to know in more detail reads the annual reports of the World Watch Institute. Our heads of state read the reports of their secret services. But what do we then know about the future of the world? Who knew of the changes in East Europe before they occurred in 1989? The future is unforeseeable. Who had counted on the collapse of Communism in 1991? We can't even depend on our enemies!

If we want to know God's future, where shall we look? It cannot be read in the stars as the astrologists believe. Nor does it stand in the Tarot cards as the futuretellers claim. As simple as it sounds; it stands in the Bible. This "good old book" is the book of God's promises. The Bible is the book of remembered hopes, because the Bible is the book of God's future; God's future in the past, God's future in present and the future of God in the time to come.

If we were to ask the people on the streets in Moscow and in Washington, in Tokyo and in Tübingen about their prospects for the future, what would we hear? They would tell us about their fears for survival, of their concerns about poisoned nature and the destroyed environment and, not least of all, about the nuclear bombs which have gotten out of control. We live in an "age of anxiety" and rightfully so, because our fears warn us of the dangers of the future. But there is also a growing number of people who feel themselves to be super-

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fluous and seen objectively, they are: surplus people. They answer our question harshly "There is no future for us! We are the no-future generation!"

If we could ask the people of the Bible about their prospects for the future, what would we hear? Abraham and Sarah would tell us of God's promise which made them refugees in foreign countries. Moses and Miriam would report to us about the God of Exodus and of the vision of the promised land of freedom. Isaiah and Jeremiah would speak of the Messiah and of the new covenant. John the Baptist, Mary, Peter and Martha would talk about Jesus and the Kingdom of God, which has come so close in them. From their beginning to their end, the people of the Bible are people of hope. They have all seen in the long night of this world the star of hope and have observed the first rays of dawn which proclaim God's new day. They have all prepared themselves to search for God's future, because they have all experienced the invitation: "Come, everything is ready."

Today we belong to both groups. We read the newspaper and worry, we read the Bible and hope. We feel the fear, just like everyone else, of the coming dangers of this world. We believe, just like the people of the Bible, that the divine salvation is near. This is an "age of hope." We believe in God and hope for God's coming, but we are not optimists—we are afraid for our world. We are afraid of the future dangers of the world, we can imagine the social catastrophes in Russia, we can calculate the ecological disasters in our area, we know more than we can believe but we are not pessimists because we believe in God and that God will not let the creation drop. Those who hope in God are not optimists. They do not need the "power of positive thinking." Those who hope in God are not pessimists. They do not need the logic of negative dialectics. Those who trust in God know that God is waiting for them, that God hopes in them, that they are invited to God's future and with this, have received the most wonderful invitation of their life.

I will speak about the topic "All Things New: Invited to God's Future" using the method of "looking-evaluating-acting." I want to first look at the biblical texts, to see what new things have happened from God, then I want to evaluate this theologically and in four questions and answers, open the theological discussion about evangelism and eschatology. Finally, I want to show how we are to "evangelize" today with certainty about our mission and respect to the people.

FOUR BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

1. The first perspective is the final vision of God's future from the Revelation made to John, "... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. And he who sat upon the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new' " (Rev. 21:4-5a).

John who was banned to the island of Patmos because of his belief had "seen" this new creation of all things (Rev. 1:2). Where did he see it? He reported "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day" (Rev. 1:10). What he saw there overwhelmed him just as it did the apostles at Easter and then overwhelmed Paul with his calling: He saw the humbled and crucified Christ in the splendor of God's glory and in this resur-

rection day of Christ, he saw not the last day but the "first day," the end of this old world in the beginning of God's new world. The end of the world" is the new day of eternal life. Like the first creation, so the new creation of all things also begins with the light which drives away the darkness. This is the new time of the new creation, the eternal spring of life in which that which is withered blossoms and the dead becomes alive. "See, I make everything new," this is a creation which remains and does not again pass away, "world without end," a "beginning without end."

What does John see? He sees how the infinite, eternal God comes to his finite creatures and onto this vulnerable earth. God comes in order to live with God's temporal creatures on this earth and to come to rest in God's creation just like in the beginning on the Sabbath day. God does not want to find a dwelling place in particular temples or cathedrals but rather in God's entire creation. The cosmos is God's temple, the chaos God's enemy. Therefore, the beauty of the new creation will drive away the chaos (Isa. 66: 1,1; Acts 7: 38-49: "The heaven is my throne, and earth my footstool"). Heaven and earth wait to become God's house because all creatures are created for love. The divine spirit is in all of them and opens them for God's future. God finds no rest until all of God's creatures—like in the parable of the Prodigal Son—have returned to God's lap.

God, therefore, remains restless in history until the world becomes God's sanctuary and God can call upon all of the creatures and find residence. New creation—that means: "God will dwell with them, and they shall be God's people." The creator no longer stands aloof of the creation but rather, enters into the creation. Then God's eternal vitality becomes the life power for God's creatures and in God's presence, God's humans find space to live, space to freely develop and space to love. God's eternal presence unifies what death has separated. If this takes place, then death, darkness, cold and chaos disappear from the creation. If the living God comes so close to us, then the dead become alive and death will be no more. If God's glory is revealed, then God's "beauty" will redeem the world (Dostoevski). If God comes so close to us, then the distance from God which we feel in the crying at the graves disappears. God finds a home with the people and the people find a home with God. People and animals, earthly and heavenly creatures become neighbors and fellow members in God's common house. John sees this at Patmos: the future of this toilsome and burdened world in God and God's future in the new, liberated and joyful world.

2. The second perspective is the experience of God's arrival to us in Christ. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17-19). What happens through Christ for us and to us, has two sides: we find God in Christ and we find ourselves in Christ.

This is the true God: the one who goes the way of suffering up to the death on the cross in Christ in order to reconcile the unfaithful and hostile world himself; the one who takes death in deep abandonment upon himself in order to comfort all who are abandoned through his love; the one who becomes poor in order to make the poor rich. God comes to us in Christ and reconciles us with him.

And this is our true self: sins which separate us from the source of life are forgiven. Our hostility is overcome. God reconciles us and we are reconciled ones. God loves us and we are loved ones.

When we live in Christ then we experience this unique experience of God: God has come to us. God is so closely present to us that we live, move and are in him.

When we live in Christ, then we experience the unique experience of ourselves: we are accepted with God. We are good, just and beautiful like a new creature on the first day of creation. The old, that is, this oppressing burden of anxiety and violence, falls away from us like an old coat. The new, that is, the spring of the whole creation, has already grasped us. Our transformation begins with the experienced reconciliation. What God's future will be according to the great vision (Rev. 21) is already arriving with us here and now through reconciliation in Christ. Where divine reconciliation takes hold, there the tears will be wiped away, there suffering and crying will end because "the old being" has passed away. Paul also "sees" it like John of Patmos. He also encourages us to open our eyes and to see our life in Christ: "Behold, the new has come." This is no mystical faith with closed eyes but rather a messianic faith with wide open eyes. He even adds: "Everything has become new." This can only mean that those who see themselves and their world with Christ's eyes see it as "reconciled" in spite of its hostility, and with this, an already newly created world. Also, our opponents are no longer our deadly enemies, but rather humans for whom Christ has died and who, God has already reconciled with himself, if they know it or not. How could we take more seriously our own and the atheism of our fellow humans than the real reconciliation of the true God!

3. The third perspective is the experience of God's presence in us in the Spirit of life. "Truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). What Paul calls the new creation in Christ, John calls the new birth out of God's Spirit. What according to Paul has taken place for us without us in Christ, that is, reconciliation, becomes effective, according to John, in us through the rebirth of our life out of the Spirit.

Both metaphors complement one another: God creates new humans out of us through the work of reconciliation and out of the Spirit of God we are reborn as from a mother. So we are new creations of the Father and children of the Holy Spirit. The being-in-Christ and the new-life-of-the-Spirit are two sides of the same thing, but they express different aspects.

What do we describe with the metaphor "rebirth"? It is the experience of boundless joy of life. Those who experience the Holy Spirit, experience God's power of life. They feel born anew. Light inundates them, love permeates them, their powers are filled with new energies. The rebirth of life away from acts of violence and guilt, away from the mistakes and the injuries of daily life and finally, away from the shadow of death is an amazing affirmation of life. It brings new vitality into the body and soul and is no world-alien spirituality. If we put the Hebrew word "*ruach*" in the place of the word "spirit," then it immediately becomes clear which self-experiences are associated with the experience of this power of God.

Life begins in the moment in which we are moved by the Spirit. Our mortal life becomes eternal life through the rebirth out of the Holy Spirit, because what is born from God is eternal and does not pass away. Eternal life does not only begin "after death," but rather it begins here and now in the experienced rebirth. There is eternal life before death! We do not experience it according to the length as a life without end. We experience it according to the depth. Each true and totally lived moment is the presence of eternity and is eternal.

With the experience of the Spirit begins the spring of life, regardless of whether we are young or old. The "well of life" (*fons vitae*) as the Holy Spirit has been called from the beginning, flows in us again (John 4:14). We become fertile again just like the old and young trees in spring. The rebirth of the entire cosmos (Matt. 19:28) begins in us.

4. The fourth perspective is God's challenge to a new mode of living: "Be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 3:23-24). This new life gains its standard in the following of Christ and its inner power from the Spirit which makes alive. According to the witness of the people in the Bible, it is said, to break with the pattern of this perverted world, "do not be conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2), but rather anticipate the divine new creation of all things and the rebirth of life. For Paul, this was a change from darkness to light: "the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light..." (Rom. 13:12). It is like a change from sleeping to being awake. With this, he meant not only a new personal morality, but rather a totally new life in justice and holiness, personally and in the community, in the community and politically, politically and environmentally—with all powers of the Spirit in us and in all possibilities which God opens to us through God's providence. The World Council of Churches' Conference in Uppsala in 1968 carried the motto: "Behold, I make all things new." In its message, it formulated God's challenge to the renewal of life very well: "Trusting in God's renewing power we call upon you. Involve yourselves in this anticipation of God's kingdom and let something of the new creation which Christ will complete on his day become visible already today."

In these four biblical perspectives, we see God approach us in a united movement. It begins with the last one, the universal vision of God's future: "all things new!" and then comes to God's special arrival to us in faith in Christ: "in Christ a new creature," and to his presence in the experience of the Spirit: "born anew from the Spirit," and to his challenge to us: "anticipate God's new creation." But this means: God's future has already begun. The new creation of all things is already in process. We are invited to participate in it.

FOUR THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

In the second part, we want to attempt to answer, on the basis of the biblical insights which we have gained, some theological questions which are posed in reference to God's future in order to learn to evaluate.

What can we know of God's future and how can we talk about it?

There are two methods used to talk about the future. The one method is extrapolation, the other is anticipation. All future researchers and future planners extrapolate from the data and trends of the past and present into the future. With trend analysis, projections and probability judgements, they research what will be. Past and future lie on one and the same linear timeline for them. There is no qualitative difference between past and future. Therefore they do not really research the future, but rather they only extend their presence into the future. They understand future as extrapolated and extended presence and with this, repress the new possibilities of the future. According to this understanding, future is that which will be, but not that which comes. In this understanding of the future, there is no eschatology but rather only teleology. There is only the eternal "becoming and passing away," but no final advent.

The method of anticipation proceeds quite differently. Anticipation means expectation and forestalling that which comes. In our fear, we perceive coming dangers and forestall them. In our hope, we perceive and forestall our coming luck. But not only these effects of the heart, but our ideas and terms anticipate the perception of what is to come. Anticipations are foreseeing images and prenotions for that which we are looking for and expecting. They are creative imaginatings of that which will come. Without such images of quest in the mind, we would not find anything. But when we find that which we are looking for, then our experiences always correct our expectations. The willingness for surprise, therefore, always belongs to the anticipation of the coming. For the method of anticipation, there is a qualitative difference between past and future. It is the difference between reality and possibility. The past is the actual, the future is the possible and the present is the front on which the possible can be realized or thwarted.

I can tell about the past because it lies there finished. I can only grasp the future through the means of anticipation. Whoever tells stories about the future makes it into the present. With this understanding "future" (*Zu-kunft*) is, as the German word says, not that which will be, but rather that which comes upon us.

If we apply these differences to our question, then the following answers result:

To speak of God's future does not mean a report of future history, but rather the promise of the future of all human history.

To speak of God's future does not mean an extrapolation of the past and present, but rather an anticipation of God's new world in the midst of this old world.

God's future is only experienced in the expectation of its coming. The experienced new creation in Christ and the experienced rebirth out of the Spirit are the real anticipations of God's future which make all things new.

What about the apocalyptic end of the world in the hope of God's future?

In the Christian eschatology we speak of God's future in two ways: it is the fulfillment of history (*telos*) and the end of history (*finis*). Because it is the fulfillment of God's creation and of God's promissory history, it is also the end of this

perverted world—the end of sin and of death, of injustice and of violence. Before it says in Rev. 21: “Behold, I make all things new,” it is ascertained “the old has passed away” (the same in 2 Cor. 5:17). We look apocalyptically at the end of this world, eschatologically at the resurrection of God’s new world.

Both perspectives belong together. If one only looked at the goal: “all things new,” then one would become an optimist who does not know pain and tears. If one only looked at the end, then one would become a pessimist who disdains God’s grace which is new each morning. End-of-the-world-apocalypticism is just as unchristian as naive faith in progress. A Christian theology of history does not teach that everything will always become better, nor that everything will become worse, but that with the coming salvation, the danger also grows. With the good, the evil also grows and where Christ is present, there is also the Anti-Christ. Where humans comply with God through their lives, there also arise the contradictions of other humans against God. The conflicts branch out and become harder. It will become increasingly critical in the world. History itself is nothing other than a continual crisis. Therefore so many dream of the “end of history” in the victory of liberal democracy and global marketization. But every anticipatory “end of history” only leads history on and makes it more critical and more dangerous. We can summarize this paradox of history in two sentences:

The German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, student of Theology in Tübingen, at an earlier time consolingly wrote: “Where danger is, salvation also grows.”

The German philosopher Ernst Bloch, whose last place of residence was Tübingen, answered, “Where salvation approaches, the danger also grows.”

Both sentences are right. Therefore, the fear of the danger also belongs to the trust in salvation and with the eschatological hope the apocalyptic fear of the annihilation of the world grows.

Does God’s future mean only “all things new,” or does it also bring the judgement?

The judgement of the *old being* is the presupposition for the creation of the *new being*. Without world judgement, no new creation. But what is God’s judgement and what does it accomplish? According to biblical understandings, through God’s judgement, God’s justice will be carried out everywhere against the injustice, because only God’s justice creates peace. In God’s judgement, God will become the judge of peace for the nations (Psa. 94:96-99). The messianic king will establish and strengthen Israel “with righteousness and justice” (Isa. 11:4). God’s judgement does not deal with retaliation but rather the victory of God’s creative and saving justice. In front of “Christ’s chair of judgement” the concern is not retaliation of our sins, but rather about God’s justice which creates justice and justifies. The judgement does not serve the condemnation, but rather the re-socialization of the sinners. God’s final judgement is not God’s last word. God’s last word is: “Behold, I make all things new.”

The final judgement is preliminary. The new creation is final. The judgement serves the new creation. It is, therefore, not to be feared but rather to be hoped for. It is high time to no longer threaten the people with God’s judgement and to

instill them with fear of the judgement. The message of God's last judgement is a joyful message, a liberating message, "there is justice in the world and there is one who stands for it forever." The murderers will therefore not eternally triumph over their victims.

"All things new"—does this mean "reconciliation of all things" and "restoration of all things"?

This question is difficult to answer because only God will answer it. If we think humanistic-universally, then God could be a particularist. But if we think pietistic-particularly, then God could be a universalist. When I seriously examine myself, then I must say, "I am not a universalist but God could be one." One can also answer the question trickishly as Karl Barth did: "I do not teach the reconciliation of all things, but I do not not teach it."

I myself do not want to evade the question one way or the other but rather answer with a "Confession of Hope" which I learned from Christoph Blumhardt: "The confession of hope has completely been lost by the church...that God would give up on something or someone in the whole world, cannot be said, neither today nor in eternity...the end must be: behold, everything is God's! Jesus comes as the one who carries the sins of the world. Jesus can judge but not condemn. I want to proclaim this down into the depths of hell and I will not be put to shame." I take this up and say, "I do not preach the reconciliation of all things, I preach the reconciliation in Christ's cross to all. I do not proclaim that all will be redeemed but I trust that it will be proclaimed so long as all will be redeemed."

Universalism is not the content of Christian proclamation, but rather its presupposition and its goal. If God's future really means "all things new," then all are invited and no one is excluded. The invitation remains open even for those who refuse it because it comes from God. I am not a universalist, I am a "theologian of the cross."

Does hell exist?

Yes, I believe hell exists. In the horrors of Auschwitz and in the horrors of Vietnam, people experienced the *Hell of pain* and the *Hell of guilt*. That is why we speak of the "Hell of Vietnam" and the "Hell of Auschwitz," meaning senseless, inescapable suffering, unforgivable guilt and an abysmal abandonment by God and by people. Does a hell after death also exist? I believe so, for hell before death is already worse than death. For many, death means redemption from suffering and from the fear of hell. Do you know someone who is in hell? Would you tell a mother, weeping at her son's grave, that her son is in hell because he did not come to faith during his life? The first question will cause you to remain uncomfortably silent, nor will you be able to say "yes" in response to the second question. I do know someone, however, who was in hell: it was Jesus Christ, about whom the Apostolic Creed says: "he descended to hell." What did Christ experience in hell? According to some ancient interpretations, after his death he descended to the realm of the dead in order to proclaim the gospel of their salva-

tion to them and to save them. Luther says that between Gethsemane and Golgotha, Christ suffered the agonies of hell for us when he experienced the deepest abandonment by God. However we understand Christ's descent to hell, Luther is correct when he says: "You must not look for hell and eternal pain in yourself, not in itself, nor in those who are damned. Consider the image of Christ, who went to hell for you and was abandoned by God as one who was eternally damned, and who said upon the cross 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' Behold, in his image your hell is overcome" (*Von der Bereitung zum Sterben*, 1519). Because Christ was in hell and suffered its pain we can hope for salvation in hell. Because Christ was raised from hell, its gates are open and its walls have been broken down: "Even in hell you are there!" Hell is hell no more. "Where, O hell, is your victory? Thanks be to God, who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:55).

THE GOSPEL OF GOD'S FUTURE

What does evangelism have to do with eschatology? Invited to God's future—this is a new point of view which requires a new practice. Up to now, we have known evangelism only as the spreading of the Christian civilization or the propagating of the Church (*plantatio ecclesiae*) or the spreading of one's own faith experience. It was not mission in light of the end, not mission of God's kingdom, not an invitation to God's future. Therefore, the Christian missions also brought more of the Christian denominationalism into the world and prepared less the way to God's kingdom. But what do we actually want when we witness to and proclaim the Gospel?

1. The word gospel appears matter of factly for the first time in Isaiah (57:7), and means the joyous message which precedes the liberating rule of God. The messengers announce the arrival of God to the people and by announcing it, they put God's new time in force.

Also in the New Testament, the Gospel is of eschatological value—it is the kingdom of God expressed in word. It is the preliminary *Parousia* of Christ in the liberating word. "Where the Gospel is proclaimed, there the elevated Lord anticipates his appearance in his word, in human speech, because he anticipates his future in the announcement of himself as the coming one," explains the New Testament scholar Heinrich Schlier. Gospel and evangelism are therefore eschatological terms in the New Testament. They are the word and the language through which God reveals God's future and makes known God's new creation of all things. The Gospel is, therefore, also the word which liberates the captives and justifies the sinners, wipes the tears from the eyes and lifts up the burdened people. The Gospel is the announcement of the messianic time: "The night is far gone, God's day is at hand!" The Gospel is the invitation to God's future. Those who believe in the Gospel, experience the powers of the future world (Heb. 6:5), they enter in the spring of the new creation.

2. Evangelism is invitation, nothing more and nothing less. It is not an instruction and also not a conversion but rather, a petition: "Be reconciled to God!"

Those who consciously or unconsciously testify to the Gospel and those who proclaim the Gospel as representative have no other authority than the authority of petition. This is the authority of the petitioning Christ, who carries our sins on the cross and invites us with his extended arms: "Come, because everything is prepared." The petitioning ones do not coax nor do they threaten. The petitioning ones solicit for the acceptance of their invitation. They address the freedom of the ones who are invited. God, in Christ, has reconciled the world with God, therefore be reconciled to God! Reconciliation is possible. It also means this here: God will create all things new, therefore, take hold of these possibilities. They are already there, in you and with you. Peace is possible. Justice is possible. Liberation is possible. God made the impossible possible and we are invited to take hold of our possibilities for life. Take part in the renewal of life in society and in nature.

3. How does this invitation to God's future differ from the mission through expansion of the existing Christianity? To say it simply: through the hope for the new. We do not want to extend Western civilization, but rather invite people of all civilizations to the new creation of all things. We do not want to expand the realm of power of the "church as the exclusive way to salvation," but rather experience the new creations of God's spirit in other cultures. Wherever we proclaim the Kingdom of God, there God's people will gather automatically and they will have their own forms of belief and worship. The new creation is as colorful and manifold as the creation in the beginning. Uniformity of the Church represses the pluralism of the Holy Spirit and its gifts.

In place of the modern, introverted, Church-orientation of the Kingdom of God, the extroverted Kingdom-of-God-orientation of the Church is to appear again. The Kingdom of God does not exist for the sake of the Church, the Church exists for the sake of the Kingdom of God. All of the Churches' own interests must therefore be subordinated to Jesus' interest in the Kingdom of God. The Church is about more than the Church—it is about God and God's future, it is about the new creation of all things to eternal life.

"The Church is not, and never can be, an end in itself—nor is ecumenism. The Church is a pilgrim whose people are called to a journey whose goal is nothing less than God's Kingdom embracing all nations and all creation, with everything summed up under Christ as Head.

"In his missionary and eschatological perspective, the Church...is by grace the firstfruits and foretaste of the new creation. It is called also to be the sign and means by which God renews everything. Its constant prayer must be 'Your Kingdom come.' The sign of this Kingdom must be the visible and more credible reality of its life in Christ, in all his peace, justice, love, reconciliation and kindness." (*Ecumenical Vision Report*, Birmingham, 1990).