

# THE PRINCIPLE OF THE FUTURE

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## *I. In what sense can the future be used as a principle of interpretation for the present?*

Where eschatology is concerned, can we take a projected future and use it as a basis to interpret the present? And more important: Can our understanding of God be used as a base to predict a future that will be different from the past? We can answer this question only if we are able to say what God is going to do. Our ability to do this depends entirely on whether he is a God capable of controlling the future. We must ask: What can change the future to be anything but an extrapolation from the past? The only theological answer is a God of sufficient power and independence to alter history. To use the word 'eschatology' is not enough. Can we be sure that God is able to deliver on his promises?

To ground such a belief we need the premise that God cannot be absolutely fixed to any particular revolutionary social program. If we claim to know God's plan of action in advance, we tie him to that, and we must be careful to ask whether to do so actually restricts his power to act. Ironically, if one leaves God free to act outside any scenario we devise, we lose control and have no basis to support our confidence in God's future action. Most religious individuals are caught in the dilemma of wanting to be sure they know how God will act in order to ground their confidence on this certainty. However, comfortable as that is in the present, they are forced to reject God if the projected plan does not unfold. God must be free to shape the future. But to do that he must also be free of our foreknowledge and aloof from any one religious predication.

In addition, God must be independent from any need for human assistance, although he may allow us a certain freedom and partial determination within our human sphere. Classical theology fixed the future and eliminated contingency in the world in favor of divine omniscience and did so in order to secure God's independence. But that is not the only possible way to insure his control. God need not determine events from the moment of creation, but he does need to be free of dependence on human accomplishment and able to act in spite of how events turn out as a result of our contingent action. God cannot be fully revealed in any historical event, not even the whole course of history, for then he is tied to it. This places us under a handicap, for the religious temperament always likes to locate a place where God can be clearly seen. In recent times, one favorite arena to locate God has been



the course of history. But if we do this, God is tied to that reading of history and so cannot act outside of it.

The question, then as to whether a projected future can be used as a present principle of interpretation depends entirely on what the future is projected to be, and also on what power we can point to as capable of bringing it about. If God is not fully present in history, past or present, nothing in the record can serve as an adequate ground for belief in such a future God. Then, where can the notion of such a God come from, if not from the record of history? He can appear and act in the lives of individuals or small groups, but in this case the evidence is far from universal. There may be "intimations of the future" in the present or in recorded past religious events. But our ability to see this depends on whether we select certain minor happenings and give them a significance larger than the bulk of human experience and the major events of history, since all these seem to be secularly determined.

## *II. In what sense can Jesus serve as a principle to support our belief in God's future action?*

Most religions do not claim that they first study history objectively and then develop a new plan for a radically revised future. Eschatology is a useless notion without the idea of revelation. Something different needs to be told to us from what our common human experience might have led us to suspect. Usually, this novel perspective is connected to a charismatic or divine figure, one who in his or her life teaches us new things or reveals what God's future plans are to be. For Christians this activity centers in Jesus. Thus, for Christianity the locus of the interpretation of the future actually centers in the life and action of a person. Although prophets continually appear to revise or alter our image of Jesus, each later religious figure derives his or her significance from this original revealer of the future.

In what sense did Jesus' words or his life reveal the future? In the early days of his ministry, and up to the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he appeared as a messianic figure who might usher in God's kingdom for the Jews by his own action. Instead, events deteriorated rapidly until he was convicted of crimes against religion and the state and was put to death. Thus, if it were not for the resurrection event, Jesus's life would offer little basis to hope for a future different from the past. True, any individual may try to live his or her life according to Jesus' advice or example, e.g., by following the Sermon on the Mount. But although any individual may become saintly by doing so, Jesus' experience could only lead us to suspect that violence and death lie ahead for the disciple, not a radically altered future.

From Saint Paul on down, the Christian tradition has taken a belief in Jesus' resurrection as central to Christian hope. This does not mean that Jesus' life itself be-

comes our basis for belief in a new future. Rather, the center of our hope in God's action to restore a life which failed, not Jesus' active life as such. Hence, if Christians say that their hope for a new future centers in Jesus, that cannot be an accurate statement in itself, since Jesus' individual effort ended in disaster. Our center of confidence must shift to God's ability to rescue and restore human failure and destruction. God's power was not so much evidenced in Jesus's life, although we now read God's power back into it, as in what God did to Jesus' life once it ended in tragedy. Christian hope can never be a simple optimism. It is always a hope that rests on God's ability to reverse a tragic loss.

This is why Christians so often speak of the "risen Christ" and why to discover the "historical Jesus" gives us no basis of confidence whatsoever. Paul is the great first preacher of Christianity, but Paul was never Jesus' companion in his life, one filled with brief adulation and then violent destruction. Paul (or Saul) persecuted those who followed Jesus because they were heretics to Judaism. Only Saul's encounter with the risen Christ changed him into Paul. But the "risen Christ" is neither the historical Jesus nor a part of present history in any obvious sense. And even though God restored Jesus after his violent death, Jesus did not stay long on earth. Thus, no figure in the present can be a sufficient anchor for our future confidence. The Holy Spirit established the early church and roused the disciples from their despondency. We can only ask today: Where does one encounter the risen Christ, and how does one receive the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to underwrite our future hopes?

III. *Jesus' words have now been set for us, but no prediction of the future can ever be as fixed as the canon of scripture or the formulas of a dogma.*

As a matter of fact, dogmatic formulation, trust in the church as an institution and in its tradition or its leaders, the attempt to use the words of scripture as an inerrant norm—all of these efforts come about because our knowledge of and ability to predict the future is so uncertain. In the frantic search for certainty, we strive to fix the historical record and codify it. But if the future is to be radically different, and if it cannot flow from the past, to pin down the past (even if we could) would not solve our problem about the future. To say this by no means prevents anyone from claiming that he has "faith" that the future will work out according to God's promise. But it does mean that no past history or established words or institution is sufficient to justify this belief.

Is there, then, any such thing as a fixed view of God's nature and of his actions which cannot change? Much of classical theology found it essential to deny all change in God's nature in order to preserve God's power to deliver on his promises. Without appraising the metaphysical views which lies behind this belief, it should be clear to us that a God who is to make the future radically different from

the past, or different from any projection based on the course of history, must himself be capable of change. Some classical theologies dealt with this dilemma by picturing God as having programmed these future changes from the beginning of time. But if the future is uncertain, God must be free from all our predictions and open to change the future without regard for the natural drift of history. His nature must contain an ability for self-determined change.

If this is true, how are we to view: (1) the canon of scripture; (2) any dogma which seems sure of either God's past or his future actions; (3) and all the utterances of religious figures whose credibility and attractiveness depends on presenting their view of God's program of activity as a definitive plan? Given our uncertainty over the exact shape of the future, it is necessary for human creatures to project definite programs and to believe credible religious figures who offer us an outline of God's action. These accounts tell us how God *may* act but not how he *must*. It is a natural human confusion to think that what we hope will occur is in fact certain to do so. But a God-of-the-future cannot be bound by certainty. Can he, then, be trusted, so that our hopes are not in vain and our faith a worthless dream?

Yes, that is why "faith" means "belief in things unseen." And it is also why our major confusion is to mix up his promise to create a new future with tying God down to one specific program, instrument, or timetable for its enactment. Given our uncertainty about God's future actions, coupled with our faith in his ability to produce a new future, we leap at any offer to explain God's method of operation with finality. To project a definite program clarifies our uncertainties. But we must never confuse a human reading of God's intention with a certainty that he is bound to that scenario. The irony is that the same God who is free to offer us a new future is also the God whose freedom cannot allow him to be bound by the details of any definite program which we project, no matter how attracted we are to it.

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