

JESUS, HUMANITY AND THE TRINITY

A Brief Systematic Theology



KATHRYN TANNER

T&T CLARK
EDINBURGH

IRA J. TAYLOR LIBRARY
THE ILIFF SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
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For Beryl Satter

(who knows very little about Jesus and would like to keep it that way!)



The End

This chapter explores what my systematic theology suggests about the character of Christian hope. Most generally, what are we to expect of our lives in the world? What will come of them? More specifically, how do we make sense of the apparent failure and futility of our efforts to manifest in our lives and carry into the world the gifts of God flowing to us in Christ?

Indeed our lives in Christ seem to come to nothing. Ever struggling against our own sinful impulses, we never exhibit Christ's own perfect humanity. Confirmed in this wariness of Christian failing by a contemporary hermeneutics of suspicion, we have been trained, indeed, to expect fault just where the claim of moral privilege is heard the loudest. Our efforts to minister God's benefits to the world meet, moreover, the constant resistance that Jesus himself met on the cross. Expecting resistance, even defeat, at the hands of the powers of oppression and injustice on the basis of Christ's example and our own past experience, any hopes of world transformation are dashed by the spirit of contemporary cultural pessimism, by a renewed sense, in contemporary times, of structural intransigences. We need no Gregory of Nyssa to convince us that apparent progress forward in world history is really, underneath it all, nothing more than the futile washing in and washing out of waves on a beach.¹ Finally, our efforts

¹ See Jean Daniélou's introduction to *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, trans. H. Musurillo (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 47–53.

at self-reform, no matter how successful, seem wiped away with our deaths, deaths which, as modern people, we suspect are less the wages of sin, in and of themselves, than they are the consequences of our natural existence as creatures. Similarly, the socio-cosmic consequences of our ministering divine benefits to others (which is the forward focus of my systematic theology in particular) will, no matter how far they go, finally come to nothing with the end of human communities and cosmic death. The best scientific description of the day leaves little doubt that death is the end towards which our solar system and the universe as a whole move. Our sun will one day exhaust its fuel, annihilating life on this planet. The universe will either collapse onto itself in a fiery conflagration or dissipate away its energy over the course of an infinite expansion. If the scientists are right, the world for which Christians hold out hope, the world they hope to minister to as the agents of divine beneficence, ultimately has no future. Hope for an everlasting and consummate fulfillment of this world, a fulfillment of the world that would imitate the fullness of the triune life through incorporation into it, seems futile since destruction is our world's end. Because of its cosmic scope, this last failure of hope would bring with it all the others.

One strategy of response to it, often found in the this-worldly, future-oriented eschatologies of today, is for theologians to contest the finality of the world's end, and therefore the completeness of the scientific description of it. This would conform with the way that, when challenged by scientific or other naturalistic understandings of personal death, theologians contest the idea of mortality as a natural fact and therefore its inevitability as the end of finite creatures. If one takes this strategy of response, one could admit that science accurately depicts the fate of the world left to its own devices; what science leaves out of account is the influence of God's working to divert, or overcome, what one could legitimately expect to occur simply from the world's own principles of operation. Thus, a theologian might maintain that the world will not come to the dire pass scientists envision because of the ongoing influence of a good, life-affirming God in world processes generally. Or, a theologian could claim that the world will be led beyond the destruction to which it does indeed come of its own accord by a God who, as

Christians affirm of their creator and redeemer, can bring something from nothing, and life from death. God might indeed use the old world's destruction, as the scientists describe it, as a purgative means to a new heaven and earth beyond the reach of the old world's own capacities; the destruction of the world becomes in that case a kind of world purification by crucifixion signaling the death of death by way of divine power.

Taking this sort of strategy of response leaves the basic shape of a this-worldly, future-oriented eschatology – so common in contemporary theology – unaltered. At most, scientific prediction of a dire future would encourage contemporary eschatologies of this sort to move away from optimistic assessments of what one can expect from natural processes apart from God's help. The consummation of the world is not brought about by the world. A gap exists between the results of world processes and the world's consummation, a gap to be bridged by a God with the power to reverse those results, the power to bring what is otherwise absolutely unexpected into existence – say, a world that knows neither loss nor suffering.² Or, a grace-motored continuity, rather than a continuity of purely natural processes, spans the world as we know it and the world to come: the world moves without any great interruption to its consummation but it does so only in virtue of divine powers not its own.³

Besides this eschewal or qualification of evolutionary accounts of the world's end, incorporating scientific description within a future-oriented, this-worldly eschatology simply redirects theological interest to certain aspects of the usual story of the world's end. Theologians are inclined to try to describe, with the help of scientific categories, the nature of the transition to the world to come, and the new character of that world. Does, for example, that transition, or the world to come, involve spatial and temporal processes comparable to the ones scientists describe? Is that transition, or the world to come, constituted and formed at least in part by the interactive agencies of finite creatures

² See, for example, the position of Jürgen Moltmann in his *The Coming of God*, trans. M. Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

³ For this viewpoint, see Karl Rahner, 'Immanent and Transcendent Consummation of the World,' trans. D. Bourke, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 10 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), 273–89.

in something like the way the present world is?⁴ In the world to come, what features of the world might account for its being an everlasting world of perfect fulfillment, a world without death, suffering, loss, or the tragic competition for goods that sets one creature against another?⁵

Another possible strategy for responding to the apparent conflict between scientific end-time scenarios and theological hopes for the future of this world asks what a Christian eschatology might be like if scientists are right that the world does not have a future. Is it really the case that such an end is simply incompatible as it stands with Christian hopes for this world? Might there not be a Christian hope to cope with and make sense of the end of things that scientists describe? A Christian hope that copes with the world's final failure rather than denying it or replacing it with a world no longer marked by failure?

This sort of response to scientific descriptions of the end-time would do for eschatology something comparable to what many theologians have already done for the doctrine of creation in response to scientific (or philosophical) accounts of the world that conflict with Christian descriptions of a beginning of things. In response to that conflict – say, in response to philosophical or scientific arguments for the universe's eternality – theologians did not always feel the need to attack head-on the adequacy of these arguments; they often just gave a broader account of the meaning of creation, one that could be disassociated from a simple insistence on a beginning to things.⁶ On such a new account of creation, the world is the creation of God whether it has a beginning or not and whatever the process of its origination. In the case of a conflict between eschatology and scientific description, one would think that one could, similarly, reinterpret the common

⁴ See Miroslav Volf, 'Enter into Joy! Sin, Death and the Life of the World to Come,' in *The End of the World and the Ends of God*, ed. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2000), 256–78.

⁵ See Moltmann, *Coming of God*, part 4.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas is an early figure who suggests the shape of this strategy of response. Although he does dispute the deductive status of philosophical arguments for the eternality of the world in order to make room for the scriptural claim that the world has a beginning (philosophers, according to Aquinas, cannot prove the eternality of the world but make, at best, only a relatively good, probable case for it), Aquinas offers a general account of creation in which nothing much rides on the fact that the world does have a beginning. See his *Summa contra Gentiles*, trans. J. Anderson (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), Book 2, chapters 18 and 38.

contemporary outlook on eschatology so that it holds whatever the final state of the world, as scientifically described.⁷ The fundamental meaning of Christian hopes for the world would have no more stake in whether or how the world ends than a Christian account of creation has in whether or how the world had a beginning (say, by means of a big bang).

One might suspect that such a reinterpretation of Christian claims would mean Christianity's relinquishing of its hold on cosmic questions. Such questions would be turned over to the scientist (or philosopher), leaving Christianity without a say on matters that concern this world. Again, however, the comparable case of creation does not bear this worry out.

Belief in creation can, it is true, be spiritualized as a way of avoiding conflict with scientific descriptions of a beginning of things – say, by reducing the import of creation to a psychological, purely human and private matter. For example, creation might mean nothing more than what it means for Rudolf Bultmann: a sense of the uncanny, of the irretrievable importance of the moment, and of being disposed by a force beyond one's control.⁸ When reinterpreted to avoid conflict with scientific and philosophical descriptions of the beginning of things, creation can, however, continue to concern this world and its relation to God, as the classic example of Thomas Aquinas' effort to reinterpret creation in the face of the best Aristotelian science of his day makes clear.⁹

In a move that is typical for most modern theological struggles with scientific description of the world's beginnings, creation for Thomas is de-temporalized, one might say, so that it becomes a relation of dependence on God that everything that exists enjoys in every respect that it is. Such a relation of dependence holds whether the world has a beginning or not. This irrelevance of the question of beginnings suggests nothing other-worldly, subjective or a-cosmic about the account of creation being offered. To the contrary, it is the very

⁷ While admitting for both scientific and religious (for example, scriptural) reasons, that the world does end.

⁸ See Rudolf Bultmann, 'The Meaning of Christian Faith in Creation,' in his *Existence and Faith*, trans. and ed. Schubert Ogden (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1961), 206–25.

⁹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, Book 2, chapter 18.

irrelevance of that question of beginnings that guarantees the cosmic comprehensiveness of the account. If being created means to depend on God, the world that is created is not just the world of the beginning but the world as a whole, across the whole of its duration however long or short that may be, whether with or without a beginning or end.

If one were to reinterpret eschatology in a similar fashion so that considerations of the world's end – the eventual failure of the world's existence and with it all achievement of the good within it – are no longer of paramount concern, presumably the consequences might also be similar to what one finds in the Thomistic case. The consequences would be, in other words, not an other-worldly or spiritualized eschatology that leaves concern for this world behind (say, by the reduction of the content of the claim to human attitudes towards the world), but a more comprehensively cosmic eschatology. Such an eschatology would be comprehensively cosmic in the sense that its preoccupations would not center on the world of the future but on the world as a whole and on an ongoing redemptive (rather than simply creative) relation to God that holds for the world of the past, present and future. What might drop out in response to a conflict with science is not the this-worldly, cosmic character of Christian eschatology but simply its predominantly future orientation.

However, can Christian hopes do without preoccupations concerning the world's future? With the loss of those concerns for the future has not too much been lost? If Christian eschatology does not offer specifically future hopes, what might motivate action to bring in a better future for humans and the planet? Without expectations of a world to come, what disturbs complacency concerning the world as it seems to work now? Without hopes for the future of this world, what can Christian eschatology do to alleviate despair in the face of present injustice and suffering? What is to prevent the sense that all our efforts to better the world are simply futile?

To put the same set of worries another way, has perhaps too much of a modern scientific viewpoint been conceded by the strategy of response I am exploring? What is to prevent such an eschatology from being co-opted by the exterministic cultural concomitants of a belief in cosmic death? Christian eschatology in that case would simply

confirm the untoward contemporary understandings of world, self, and community that scientific predictions of the world's end already play into and foment: (1) a nihilistic sense of the futility of efforts to improve the human situation and conditions of the planet – what is the difference if everything is to end in some cosmic crunch? – and (2) an irresponsible, simply self-interested focus on goods that can be had in the moment without much expenditure of effort. As the Bible gives shocked expression to such a view of the moral space of human life:

They said to themselves in their deluded way: 'Our life is short and full of trouble, and when man comes to the end there is no remedy; no man has ever been known to return from the grave. . . . [C]ome then, let us enjoy the good things while we can, and make full use of the creation, with all the eagerness of youth. . . . Down with the poor and honest man! Let us tread him under foot. . . . For us let might be right!' (Wisdom of Solomon 2:1, 6, 10, NEB).

My explorations, then, of an eschatology for a world without a future will have to have two parts. First, of course, I need to lay out the basic shape of such an eschatology, developed in light of the incarnation-centered Christology of previous chapters. But I also need, in a second step, to explain the main options such a position affords for obligating and inspiring action to further the flourishing of human beings and the planet. How are hopelessness in the face of present trouble, complacent inactivity regarding suffering and injustice, and irresponsible self-concern, to be avoided? In short, absent a vision of this world to come, absent expectation of final success, what motivates and helps sustain action in history for a better world over the long haul? This second part of the project is to make clear, then, how my reinterpretation of contemporary eschatology does not bring with it the loss of eschatology as political theology, the loss of active, socially committed challenge to structures of oppression, injustice, and ecological devastation that is so much a part – and rightly so – of many contemporary eschatologies.

Eschatology for a World that Ends

As parallel modifications in Christian accounts of creation suggest, what is required here is an account of a saving relationship with God that undercuts the religious importance of the question whether the

world will end. Just as creation in its essential meaning does not refer to what happens in the beginning (in contradistinction to what happens after), so the central claim of eschatology must not refer to what happens at the end (in contradistinction to what happens before). Understood in that way the eschaton – consummation in the good – would have to do primarily with a new level of relationship with God, the final one surpassing what we are simply as creatures, beyond which there is no other – the relation with God discussed in previous chapters as life in the triune God, as that becomes possible for us through the Father's sending of the Son in Christ by the power of the Spirit. What is of fundamental religious interest for the question of salvation is the character of this relation to God and not what the world is like or what happens to it considered independently of that relation – say, at its end. One retains a religious interest in the future of the world *as it exists in this new relationship with God*, that is, one wants to know what consequences this relationship with God has for the world. But the world has this future whether the world, considered in itself, ends or not and whatever the process by which it does; the world will have this future, irrespective of such events, because it has this future in virtue of the character of its relationship with God. Worries about the end of the world are relativized, that is, undercut by a new theological context of discussion, since the world can enjoy this new level of relationship with God whatever its state, whether or not the world ends, and whatever the process by which it does. The relationship holds whether the world continues to exist or ceases to exist.

To see the sense of these last remarks, it is important to see how life in God is a way of developing some typical biblical moves that already relativize or undercut the religious significance of the difference between biological life and death (or life as existence and death as cessation of existence).¹⁰

First, there is the dominance particularly in the Old Testament of a wider (so-called metaphorical) use of 'life' and 'death,' where life refers

¹⁰ For the following discussion, see Lloyd Bailey, *Biblical Perspectives on Death* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); Rudolf Bultmann, *Life and Death: Bible Keywords from Gerhard Kittel's Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (London: A&C Black, 1965); and Eberhard Jüngel, *Death – The Riddle and the Mystery*, trans. I. and U. Nicol (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), chapter 4.

to fruitfulness and abundance, longevity, communal flourishing and individual wellbeing, and death is a catch-all for such things as suffering, poverty, barrenness, oppression, social divisiveness and isolation. According to these more extended senses of life and death, one can be dead while alive; death enters into the course of life as the threat of such things as sickness, impoverishment, and lack of fulfillment. One can also enjoy a death that imitates life – in old age, surrounded by one's posterity. 'Your descendants will be many and your offspring like the grass of the earth. You shall come to your grave in ripe old age' (Job 5:25–6).

A second, similar sort of relativization of the difference between biological death and life is suggested by Old Testament passages in which 'life' and 'death' seem to refer to the *way* one lives or dies, in particular whether one lives (or dies) for God (and for others). One lives, in this sense, to the extent one dedicates one's life to the God who is the source of life in all its extended senses, to the extent that one keeps faith with a relationship with God by maintaining the form of life that relationship with God requires. All the goods of life – in our first, extended sense of the term 'life' – are blessings that stem ultimately from relationship with God. To die is to break with this life-giving, blessing-bestowing relationship with God and the covenant it forms; to live is just to place oneself willingly and joyfully within it. 'I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life that you . . . may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days . . .' (Deut. 30:19–20). One can and should hold fast to God whatever the dangers and vicissitudes of life; in this sense one enjoys a gift that cannot be lost, a blessing of life that survives every trial and tribulation, every threat, that is, from the forces of death. Whatever the adversity, one can take comfort in the fact that 'Yahweh is my chosen portion and my cup' (for example, Ps. 16:5), 'my refuge' (Ps. 73:28); indeed, in such circumstances it becomes clear the way God's 'steadfast love is better than life' (Ps. 63:3).

But can the relations with God and neighbor that spell life be sustained across the fact of biological death? (Spiritualizing those relations, in the way the last biblical quotation suggests, can only go so far; it is therefore an ultimately unsuccessful way of relativizing

the difference between life and death.) Does death not disrupt one's relationship to the life-giving powers of God? 'I shall lie in the earth; you will seek me, but I shall not be' (Job 7:21). 'For Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness' (Isa. 38:18). To what extent then does our second sense of life in relational terms genuinely relativize the difference between continued existence and its cessation?

For the Old Testament, the worry I am now raising primarily concerns the effect of biological death on an individual's relation to God. The death of individuals may be final for them but not for the community, which continues to exist in relation to God. Thus, a single generation of the community might be cut off from God and suffer a grievous downturn, but presumably there might still be hopes for the next.

Despite a sense of the finality of death for the individual him/herself, worries about individual mortality can be quelled in the Old Testament by a more primary concern for the community and by a sense of the dead individual's continuing existence for it – through offspring or communal memory.¹¹ So, the finality of his own individual death is softened in this way by Jacob on his deathbed: 'I am about to die, but God will be with you, and will bring you again to the land of your ancestors' (Gen. 48:21). One can participate beyond one's death in the ongoing life of the community through one's children, but even 'eunuchs . . . shall receive from me something better than sons and daughters: a memorial and a name in my house' (Isa. 56:3–5, NEB).

This sort of response to the irrevocability of personal death is lost, for us, however; with scientific descriptions of the end-time, all human communities, along with the cosmos itself, seem to suffer as irrevocable a death as any individual person. The problem posed by personal death, in short, is now simply writ large for us. Are there biblical perspectives, particularly Old Testament ones in which the finality of personal death is assumed, that might be of help here in discussing a relation to God unaffected by death, perspectives on personal death that might be extended by us moderns to the whole of the cosmos marked for death?

¹¹ See Bailey, *Biblical Perspectives on Death*, 58–9.

Old Testament passages suggest, first of all, that the dead are not cut off from God because God is the Lord of both life and death. Death is a sphere within God's power, God's reach, and therefore (one presumes) the dead are not lost to God. 'The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord' (Job 1:21). 'There is no god beside me; I kill and make alive; I wound and I heal' (Deut. 32:39; also, for example, 1 Sam. 2:6–7). Therefore, 'where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there' (Ps. 139:7–8). In keeping with such ideas, maintaining a relationship with the God who gives life would not seem to require the destruction of death (as a more apocalyptic outlook requires). Death does not have the power to separate one from God. Such a confidence, without the development of any explicit ideas about life after death, may underlie Psalms 16, 49, and 73. Thus, in a context where literal death seems to be at issue ['those who are far from you will perish; you put an end (to them)'], the psalmist exclaims, 'my flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever' (Ps. 73:26).

'Eternal life' (in some of its New Testament senses) develops this suggestion that not even death can separate us from the love of God and others.¹² One with the Word, Jesus is not separated from God on the cross; exactly here (as everywhere else in Jesus' life), the light and life of God enter into darkness and death, to heal and save.¹³ In virtue of a continuing union with the Word that death cannot obstruct, the humanity of Christ, as its own powers of life perish on the cross, is able to draw upon the life-giving power of God so as to be resurrected and brought glorified to the Father.¹⁴ United with Christ, we too are inseparable from God: 'Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from

¹² See, for example, C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

¹³ A sharp contrast here with the position of Jürgen Moltmann; see, for example, his *The Crucified God* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), chapters 5 and 6. For criticism of Moltmann on this score, see Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 824–5.

¹⁴ See Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. J. McGuckin (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 125–33.

the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8:38). Because we are united with the life-giving humanity of Jesus by the power of the Spirit across the fact of our deaths, as our lives perish of themselves, lose their own powers of living, God gives to us God's own powers of life so as to maintain us. As in the case of Christ's crucifixion, where the divine powers that are always his are put to special use in a victory over death, this life of Christ is also ours now by grace, to be employed by God in a special way at our deaths. In virtue of our relationship to the life-giving powers of Christ's humanity, our lives are lived now, as after death, in and through God's own powers of life: 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:19-20). But these life-giving powers of Jesus' humanity do not overcome our deaths until we suffer them, at which time the only power of life we have is God's own.

Because it runs across the fact of death, life in Christ is eternal life. There is a life in the triune God that we possess now and after death, in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Ante and post mortem do not mark any crucial difference with respect to it. Death makes no difference to that life in God in the sense that, despite our deaths, God maintains a relationship with us that continues to be the source of all life-giving benefit. Even when we are alive, we are therefore dead in so far as we are dead to Christ. Separation from Christ (and from one's fellows in Christ) is a kind of death despite the apparent gains that might accrue to one in virtue of an isolated, simply self-concerned existence. Eternal life, moreover, is one's portion or possession despite all the sufferings of life and death in a way that should comfort sufferers of every kind of tribulation. In all the senses of death, including the biological, we therefore live even though we die if we are alive to Christ. 'If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's' (Rom. 14:8).

This understanding of eternal life follows the Old Testament suggestion, then, that all the goods of life ('life' in its extended senses) flow from relationship with God (the second biblical sense of life in relationship): 'ye that did cleave unto the Lord are alive . . . this day'

(Deut. 4:4, KJV). The effort to turn away or separate oneself from God has, in this understanding of things, the force of death, broadly construed. (It is literally the effort to unmake oneself.) Eternal life as *life in God* is a way of indicating this priority of the second biblical sense of life as relationship with God. It is also a way of specifying a character of relationship with God that might survive death. If the world, human society, and individual persons live in virtue of a relationship with God beyond the fact of their deaths, they must live *in God* and not simply in relationship *with* God. After death, the only powers of life our bodies have are God's own powers of life via the life-giving humanity of Christ in the power of the Spirit. *Eternal* life means a deepened affirmation that one's relation with God is not conditional; it is not conditioned even by biological death or the cessation of community and cosmos. The Bible maintains that God remains the God of Israel and the church, remains the God of the world that God creates and of all the individuals in it, whatever happens; the idea of eternal life is simply a way of continuing this affirmation of God's loving and steadfast faithfulness across the fact of death.

While continuing and consummating God's faithful commitment to the creature's good as that is manifest in creation, eternal life is itself a greater gift (and brings in its train greater gifts) than the relationship with God that creatures enjoy simply as creatures. The evident unconditionality of eternal life marks one such difference. With eternal life it becomes clear how relation with God as the source of all benefit cannot be broken by either sin or death (in all its senses including the biological); relations with a life-giving God are maintained unconditionally from God's side. Whatever might happen, God remains faithful to a life-giving relation to us and empowers us, through Christ, for faithfulness, too. The relationship is also unconditional, then, in that what we should be in it – the image of God's own relationship with us – is maintained or shored up from God's side (in virtue of the free favor and mercy of God in Christ) despite our own failings, sufferings, and sin. In the relationship of eternal life, God sets us in and upholds our position in relation to God, whatever we do, whatever happens to us. Despite the fact of human failing, faithlessness and death, we *are* alive in God.

Eternal life is, secondly, not the same sort of relationship as the rather external one that exists between God and creatures: our very identity as creatures is redefined so as to be essentially constituted by relationship with God. Separation from God is now impossible in a way it was not for us simply as creatures. The very meaning of this new identity is that our dependence upon God for our existence is now complete: in Christ we essentially *are* that relationship to God in a way that simply being creatures of God does not entail.

The model for this aspect of life in God is the incarnation. Jesus is the one who lives in God, the one who is all that he is as a human being without existing independently of God, the human being whose very existence is God's own existence – that is the meaning of the hypostatic union. Otherwise expressed, in Jesus God becomes the bearer of our very human acts and attributes. By grace – by virtue, that is, of a life-giving relationship with Jesus that is ours in the power of the Spirit – we enjoy something like the sort of life in God that Jesus lives. We (and the whole world) are to live in God as Jesus does, through him. In short, there is an approximation to the hypostatic union that the world enjoys through grace, most particularly after the world's death, when it transpires that, like Christ, the only life or existence we have is in and through God.

Eternal life is, in the third place, a greater gift than the relations enjoyed simply by creatures because of the gifts it brings with it. As a consequence of the incarnation, the powers and character of Godself shine through Jesus' human acts and attributes – giving Jesus' acts and attributes a salvific force (for example, so as to overcome and heal the consequences of sin) and eventuating in the manifest glorification of Jesus' own human being in the resurrection. So for us, life in Christ brings not just created goods but divine attributes such as imperishability and immortality, which are ours only through the grace of Christ in the resurrection of our bodies. When the fire of our own lives grows cold, we come to burn with God's own flame.

Understood in the way I have been developing, eternal life promotes a more spatialized than temporalized eschatology. The future-oriented eschatology of a future-oriented society here gives way to an eschatology in keeping with the present epoch, which, as Michel

Foucault describes it, is 'the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity; we are in the epoch of juxtaposition . . . of the side by side, of the dispersed. . . . [O]ur experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.'¹⁵ Eternal life is not the endless extension of present existence into an endless future, but a matter of a new quality of life in God, at the ready, even now infiltrating, seeping into the whole. Eternal life is less a matter of duration than a matter of the mode of one's existence in relation to God, as that caliber of relation shows itself in a new pattern for the whole of life.

At the most fundamental level, eternal life is ours now in union with Christ, as in the future. It is therefore not directly associated with the world's future and not convertible with the idea that the world will always have a future or further time. Here the eschaton cannot be primarily understood as what comes *from* the future to draw the time of this world ever onward.¹⁶ It is not especially associated with any particular moment of time (past, present or future) and therefore such an understanding of the eschaton has no stake in any reworked, theological account of temporal relations in which a coming future is given primacy over present and past times.¹⁷

Besides the fact that it is not temporally indexed in any of these ways, eternal life is also spatialized in that it suggests a living *in* God, a kind of placement within the life of God. Since there may come a time when the world no longer exists, this placement in God cannot be equated with God's presence or placement within the world.¹⁸ A kind of indwelling of God in us is, however, a consequence of life in God, just as incarnation has as its consequence a human life lived by the power of God. In imitation of Christ, we live in God and therefore the life we lead has a kind of composite character to match our new composite personhood: God's attributes become in some sense our own; they are to shine through our lives in acts that exceed human powers and in that way become established as part of a reborn sense of self. The consequences of that indwelling work themselves out in lives

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces,' trans. J. Miskowicz, *Diacritics* (Spring 1986): 22.

¹⁶ As both Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann suggest.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Moltmann, *Coming of God*, part 4, paragraph 3.

¹⁸ This seems to be the case for Moltmann.

with a temporal flow, but they are being worked out now as much as at any time in the future. Now as after our deaths, there is, moreover, no end to the flow, as a terminal point for religious preoccupation, because as Gregory of Nyssa would have it, the inexhaustible fullness of God's gifts makes itself felt in creatures in the form of an ever-expanding reception of gifts.

Eternal life is also understood in spatial terms so as to become a realm or sphere. Eternal life is a kingdom of God, comparable to an Old Testament sense of righteousness as a new pattern of relationships to which the righteous commit themselves. Eternal life is a new 'power-charged area, into which [humans] are incorporated and thereby empowered to do special deeds.'¹⁹ This realm of eternal life is not other-worldly, either in the sense of becoming a reality only after our deaths or in the sense of a spiritualized, merely personal attitude to events of this world. Instead, eternal life exists now in competition with another potentially all-embracing structure or pattern of existence marked by futility and hopelessness – the realm of death, in the broadest biblical sense of that. One exists in this realm of eternal life now and it extends as far as that other realm of death does, under which, as Paul says, the whole created universe groans (Rom. 8:22). Eternal life infiltrates, then, the present world of suffering and oppression, to bring life, understood as a new pattern or structure of relationships marked by life-giving vitality and renewed purpose.

Eternal life is a present reality; we possess now, in an unconditional fashion, life in God as a source of all good and need not wait for death to pass from the realm of death to that of life. 'He who hears my words and believes . . . has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has [already] passed from death to life' (John 5:24). 'So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!' (2 Cor. 5:17). As Bernard Anderson discusses the point:

[A]lready in the old age people may taste the power of the age to come; already in the old age the leaven of God's kingdom is at work; already in the time of the old creation a new creation is beginning. Thus, the relation between the

two ages . . . is neither a straight-line continuity nor a disjunctive discontinuity. Rather it is continuity and discontinuity. People are called to live in the zone where the circles overlap – where there is discontinuity with the old age even while the old age continues.²⁰

Eternal life's present reality does not mean, however, that the full consequences of our entrance into eternal life are evident immediately. Not yet manifest in a world of suffering and tribulation are the full consequences that follow from the decisive fact of eternal life, already ours. A world of blessings – now as after death – are the expected effects of life in God, and therefore life in God permits no simple spiritualization of God's gifts. We and the world are to exhibit all the good consequences of life in God as the signs or manifestations of our entrance into it. 'We . . . have crossed over from death to life; we know this, because we love our brothers. The man who does not love is still in the realm of death' (1 John 3:14–16, NEB). Eternal life is not ours then in a way that suggests there is not more to come in manifestation of it. This 'more,' however, is the world's living out or adequate reflection of what is already the case: this 'more,' for example, is a life with others that properly reflects what follows from life in God, a life in God that has already been granted to us irrevocably from God's side and that exists irrevocably as an empowering source for all the goods of life in its extended senses. After the world's death, when we no longer exist as independent beings apart from God, when we no longer have even an apparent existence outside of God, there must be some different and greater manifestation of such goods in the life we continue to live in God – that is, newness of life, sanctified and imperishable life that carries us beyond the loss of our own powers of living in death.²¹

The model for the life-affirming consequences of life in God is an account of the way the saving effects of Jesus' life and death are enabled by the incarnation. All that Jesus does and 'enjoys' for the sake of life throughout the course of his life and death in a world of sin (healing, delivering, blessing, dying for our sakes) is a consequence

²⁰ Bernard Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 238.

²¹ Note that the second coming of Christ might be interpreted here as Christ with all the world alive and sanctified through incorporation in his living body at the world's end.

¹⁹ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 376; see also, 388.

of his life in God as the incarnate Son of God. What Jesus does and what he suffers are the unfolding of the meaning of life in God (that is, the meaning of incarnation) as that power for life enters into and struggles to overcome a world of suffering, exclusion, and despair. The more that is to come in our lives and the world's (for example, the end of the host of death-dealing consequences of sin) is, similarly, an unrolling or reflection during the time of the world (and after it) of what life in God should bring with it – life in the entirety of its connotations.

In what sense, however, are the goods that properly manifest life in God compatible with the finality of death? Must literal death not be part of the realm of death that eternal life works to overcome? On the cross of Christ, death is taken up into communion with God, thereby proving that death cannot separate us from God. But the consequence of that assumption of death by God is its overcoming, the overcoming of death made clear in the resurrection. Can an understanding of eternal life really conform, therefore, with an Old Testament recognition of death as the end – now not just for individual persons, but for humanity and the cosmos?

Were eternal life understood that way, death might be overcome without requiring the end of mortality. The death that is overcome could, first of all, be simply bad death – the premature, painful, community-rending death, which is the primary Old Testament worry. Death itself, however (in the sense of temporal cessation, in the sense that each of us, the species, and the planet have a limited duration), would remain a simple fact of existence, a concomitant of the finite constitution of things as we know them. In principle, perhaps, eternity (in some sense of that) is not incompatible with finitude, with being a non-divine creature. The fact of the matter, however – following contemporary science rather than, say, an Aristotelian one in which some things (for example, stars and planets) are eternal – is that all organized structures are prone to fail. The world as we know it seems constructed in a way to ensure temporal finitude. We are made from the dust and therefore return to the dust (Gen. 3:19): 'We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground which cannot be gathered up' (2 Sam. 14:14). 'The earth and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you endure; they will all wear out

like a garment' (Ps. 102:25–6).²² As a natural fact about the created world, death could indeed be considered one of the goods of creation. Developing such an idea, one might claim, for example, that the definition of human character requires temporal finitude: If we were never to die, would we be anything in particular? Might not each moment of personal decision lose its character-forming significance if there were always to be a next one?²³ As the Bible suggests, 'So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart' (Ps. 90:12). Certainly on the viewpoint I am developing here, death (as cessation) can be made good. Even Isaiah's vision of the new heaven and earth seems to envision not the end of death but its betterment: 'I create a new heavens and a new earth. . . . No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime, for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth' (Isa. 65:17, 20). Claiming that mortality itself is to be escaped, in a world where, if the scientists are right, the very principles of the universe devolve toward death, suggests Manichaeism. The world seems to be working naturally (certainly before, that is, the entrance of human sin) in a way that runs contrary to God as the source of good.

Bad death in the sense of premature, painful and community-rending death might be overcome by the actions of human beings empowered as givers of the good through life in Christ. Much of what is bad about literal death (its breaking off of relations) and what is therefore bad about death-filled lives (the poverty, disease, discrimination and social exclusions that bring with them forms of isolation and alienation comparable to those of literal death) are overcome in being taken up into God. God's bearing of death (literal and figural) – God's remaining in relation to us in and through death – is the overcoming of death's power to break relations.

The account I have given so far of how death is overcome is not sufficient, however. While it might avoid the tendency to spiritualize

²² This is Athanasius' favorite biblical quotation when arguing for the natural mortality of human beings, in contrast to God's own proper qualities. See his 'Four Discourses against the Arians,' trans. J. H. Newman and A. Robertson, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1957), 323, 332, 340.

²³ Suggestions like these are developed by Jüngel, *Death*; and by Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1961).

bad death found in some theologians like Rahner and Jüngel who accept the natural character of death – bad death for them seems to mean primarily anxious, desperate, untrusting dispositions in the face of death – the account so far does not adequately address the fact of lives that are not made good before death, and of deaths that are in no sense good.²⁴ If death is simply the end of everything, how can one maintain the expectation of life in God as a fountain of goods in the face of all those creatures whose lives are short and brutish and whose deaths are cruel? Moreover, if we exist in God despite our deaths, the very idea of eternal life suggests some sort of overcoming of mortality itself. But what sort of overcoming of mortality is this, if death remains a creature's good and natural end?

The key to intelligibility here is not to think of our mortality being overcome independently of our life in God. One does do this – one does think of the overcoming of the creature's mortality independently of life in God – when one focuses, as most contemporary eschatology does, on the character of the creature in itself pre- and post-mortem and on the overcoming of mortality as a change in its intrinsic constitution with the transition between the two. This makes eternal life the return of creatures, after the hiatus of death, to something like the existences they had before but now in a form no longer susceptible to death. Although creatures might be said in such a contemporary eschatology to be living in God, independently of that relation they seem to have become immortal themselves.

Avoiding this way of discussing the overcoming of mortality, one can say, instead, that after death (as before death) we are taken up into the life of God as the very mortal creatures we are. It is only in God that we gain immortality; considered independently of this relation to God we remain mortal. We have immortality pre- and post-mortem only in virtue of our relation to an eternal God. Immortality is not, then, granted to the world in the form of some new natural principles that prevent loss or transience; instead, God's own animating eternity shines through or suffuses the very mortal being of those who hold their existence in God. What holds for Christ's own life-giving flesh also holds for the imperishability of our bodies:

²⁴ See Jüngel, *Death*, 122–33; and Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 88.

The flesh of the Lord received the riches of the divine energies through the purest union with the Word, that is to say, the union in subsistence [hypostatic union], without entailing the loss of any of its natural attributes. For it is not in virtue of any energy of its own, but through the Word united to it, that it manifests divine energy: for the flaming steel burns, not because it has been endowed in a physical way with burning energy, but because it has obtained this energy by its union with fire. Wherefore the same flesh was mortal by reason of its own nature and life-giving through its union with the Word in subsistence. [In short] the flesh of men is not in its own nature life-giving . . . [T]he flesh of our Lord which was united in subsistence with God the Word Himself, although it was not exempt from the mortality of its nature, yet became life-giving through its union in subsistence with the Word.²⁵

The model for our overcoming of mortality is, then, Christ's own deification. In Christ, human qualities are not elevated in and of themselves beyond what they are capable of as finite. Humanity and divinity remain distinct. Humanity is elevated beyond its capabilities through its union with divinity. It is only as borne by the Word that the humanity of Christ exhibits divine qualities, not in virtue of some new supernatural created powers, not by its becoming more like the Word.²⁶ In the colorful imagery of Gregory of Nyssa, our bodies are resurrected by the power of God's own life not by way of a change in their nature but in the way the water surrounding a bubble of air is forced upward by it. If such is the case in Christ, then certainly also for us:

For as air is not retained in water when it is dragged down by some weighty body and left in the depth of the water, but rises quickly to its kindred element, while the water is often raised up together with the air in its upward rush, being moulded by the circle of air into a convex shape with a slight and membrane-like surface, so too, when the true Life that underlay the flesh sped up, after the Passion, to itself, the flesh also was raised up with it, being forced upwards from corruption to incorruptibility by the Divine immortality.²⁷

²⁵ John of Damascus, 'Exposition of the Orthodox Faith,' trans. S. Salmond, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 9 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), Book 3, chapters 17 and 21.

²⁶ See Henry Chadwick, 'Eucharist and Christology in the Nestorian Controversy,' *Journal of Theological Studies* 2, part 2 (October 1951): 154, describing Cyril of Alexandria's position on what accounts for Christ's life-giving flesh.

²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, 'Against Eunomius,' trans. H. Wilson, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 181; see also, 179–83. Unfortunately for my purposes, on this same page he uses the vinegar/sea analogy: the flesh takes on immortality the way a drop of vinegar is overwhelmed by the sea.

Indeed, as the early Greek Fathers (Athanasius in particular) affirmed, immortality is not a possible created gift.²⁸ In paradise (as Athanasius would put it), Adam and Eve were mortal, God simply preventing their deaths as a gift of grace. So too was the humanity of Christ mortal; Jesus genuinely dies on the cross. Mortality is overcome in Christ only in virtue of union with the eternal Son of God; Christ's actual dying makes this clear – that immortality through union with the Word does not become the body's own natural property. Indeed, the less external relationship with God enjoyed by humanity in Christ is the only secure way of overcoming human mortality, if mortality is an intrinsic feature of human life. In the Garden, simply enjoying the relationship of creatures with God, the gift of immortality could be, and in fact was, lost, through sin separating us from God's life-giving power. In that way actual death became the wages of sin, though mortality is not.²⁹

If our mortality is overcome as the mortality of Jesus' humanity was, we do not leave our mortal lives behind after death, as if our deaths (and sufferings) have been simply canceled out. We are not replaced by new immortal versions of ourselves, any more than the resurrected Christ appears as someone who is not also visibly the crucified. It is the crucified body that is glorified to immortality in the resurrection of the body. Our mortality is not changed into immortality after death, mortal bodies replaced by essentially immortal ones. Instead, our mortality is (even now, though unapparently) clothed in immortality (1 Cor. 15:33).

This immortality is properly considered ours, despite the fact that we remain mortal in and of ourselves, in so far as, living in God, we are no longer our own but God's. A new identity is in this way given to the world. Not in the form of a new version of one's old nature (considered in itself) but in the transition from an old self-enclosed identity to a new one that is constituted *by* an intimate relationship between who we are (and have been) and the God who offers to mortal creatures something that remains properly God's own. We have this new identity now. We will draw on it, as the life of our own bodies

²⁸ See Athanasius, 'Four Discourses against the Arians,' 323, 326–7, 332, 340.

²⁹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Dominican Fathers (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1948), IIIa, Q. 14, A. 3, ad 2.

leaves us and as the Word incarnate then gives us his own power of life for our own in a way that makes the life-giving powers of the Word shine through our bodies as the only animating principles they 'possess.'

Clearly, something also happens *to* our mortal lives in and of themselves by virtue of life in God, post-mortem. In God, after its death, the world and everything it has ever contained may really receive as their own, intrinsic properties the blessings of life in God that were perhaps always blocked in the pre-mortem world by forces of sin and death – those forces are no more in God. Immortality may be a gift that creatures cannot receive in themselves without the loss of creaturehood (or the loss of particular identity), and therefore they may have it only in relation to God; but clearly many other gifts stemming from life in God can be received in a way that genuinely transforms the creature's own nature considered in itself – healing replacing a broken woundedness, joy replacing sorrow, justice replacing trials and woes. The life that continues to receive such gifts after death is, however, a life of the world redefined so as to be inseparable from God.

Action for the World's Betterment

How does the eschatology I am developing stimulate action for the better in this life? It might not seem to do so, for a number of reasons. Because eternal life is an unconditional, already realized possession, nothing we do is necessary to bring it about or to sustain it; this might suggest (erroneously, as I shall argue) that action is not obligated in any way *by* life in God. The present possession of eternal life might also seem to compensate for all other disappointments in a way that would simply reconcile us with them; even when matters could be improved by human action we would not see any need to do so because we already have all that we need simply in virtue of life in God. Finally, hope that sustains action in the face of obstacles and disappointment seems shattered by the world's eventual end; and thereby hope for the future of the world itself seems gone as the primary spur to present action.

While on the viewpoint I am developing one need not deny that the future will be different from the present, criticism of the present is not fueled primarily by the difference between present realities and

what one expects the future to bring. Instead, criticism of the present is prompted and complacency about it prevented by a recognition of the disparity between the realm of life and the realm of death as those two realms or powers wrestle for supremacy in the here and now. One is led to see the way the world currently runs as an insufferable, unacceptable affront, not by the disparity between the present and God's coming future, but by the utter disjunction between patterns of injustice, exclusion, and impoverishment, which make up the realm of death, and the new paradigm of existence empowered by life in God as a force working in the present.³⁰ In short, complacency is ruled out not by a transcendent future but by a transcendent present – by present life in God as the source of goods that the world one lives in fails to match. If liturgy is the place where our life in God becomes present to us, it exists as a protest against the world as it is, fueling an opposition to the world of sin like Jesus'.³¹

The shape of Jesus' life (the mode of Sonship) is this new paradigm of existence struggling in the here and now over the shape of life in the world. We are disgruntled with the world as it is in light of Jesus as our world's future, but rather than coming to us simply from the future, Jesus is the new paradigm of the world's existence already realized (in the past of his own life) and as a present force at work for the good in our lives as Christians. Therefore, 'in Christ even in our present lives we are already seized and determined by our future being'.³²

Action is the proper response to take with respect to a world that is not the way it should be, because, although human action does not bring about life in God (that is God's unconditional gift to us), human action of a certain sort is what life in God requires of us. This is so, first of all, simply because, as we saw in chapter 3, life in God is not inactive, a resting in God in the form of contemplation or adoration. Life in God fundamentally just means sharing in God's own dynamic trinitarian life of indivisible threefold movement as that dynamism is extended outward to us, to include us, in this triune God's relations

³⁰ See Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 821.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 836.

³² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 116.

with us in Christ. Eternal life means a community of life with God in Christ, a community of action in which we are taken up into Christ's own action for the world. As Jesus does the life-giving work of the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit, we, in virtue of our union with Christ, are to do the same. Eternal life turns attention, then, not just to the benefits we are to receive through Christ – our being healed, purified, elevated by Christ in the power of the Spirit – but to our active participation in Christ's own mission. That participation you might say just is the chief benefit – performing the work of the Father as Jesus did. It is the final benefit in that it is what all the others enable. Once healed, purified and elevated, we are perfected so as to participate actively in Christ's mission for the world, no longer simply responding to what God does for and to us but in perfect conformity with the Son serving the kingdom of righteousness.³³

In this life, life in God sets a task for us, secondly, as a proper sign or witness to our fellowship with God in Christ: we are to be a holy people and in that way demonstrate through the character of our deeds what it means to be God's own. Eternal life calls for a certain way of living to signal one's willing entrance into the realm of God's life-giving being. Only a particular way of living in this world – living so as to counter suffering, oppression, and division – corresponds to life in God, achieved in Christ.

Thirdly, although everything has already been given to us, in a certain sense everything still remains to be done in conformity with that fact.³⁴ We have everything we need in Christ to live different lives of righteousness, we have a sure promise and firm foundation for another kind of life in Christ. What remains outstanding is growth in openness to this gift and growth in living a life that shows throughout its course the pattern of that gift. Just as the fact of incarnation needed to be worked out in Jesus' life, through the entrance of divine powers within human life and their transformation of it, so our union with Christ needs to be worked out in ours, in an even more difficult struggle against active sin in our own lives and outside them. The more to come, the consummation of our lives in Christ, is the parallel in our lives to

³³ *Ibid.*, 111–16.

³⁴ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 514.

the theanthropic operations of Christ's life and their effects – a transformed pattern of human action that exhibits the mode of the Son.

Eternal life amounts to an unconditional imperative to action in that this life in God remains an empowering source of our action for the good, whatever the obstacles and failing of Christians. The imperative to act is also unconditional in that it is not affected by considerations of success. Irrespective of any likelihood that one's actions to better the world will succeed, and even though one knows all one's achievements will come to nothing with the world's end, one is obligated to act simply because this is the only way of living that makes sense in light of one's life in God. This is the only possibility for us given our reality as God's own. Without primary concern for the consequences of one's actions, one acts out of gratitude for the life in God one has been given, one acts out of joyful recognition that a certain course of action is part of those good gifts that stem from a special relationship with God. In this way, non-moral forms of appreciation and response inform a Christian sense of obligation.

In another sense, action is a conditional imperative as well; one is also acting in an attempt to bring about a world that more closely matches the one that life in God should bring. Although eternal life is not conditional on our action, since it is in a primary sense already achieved through God's action in Christ, the blessings in the world that should naturally follow from it are yet in some significant sense conditional in the world as we know it. Blessings flow from life in God but their egress from that source can be blocked by sin, understood as the effort to turn away from relations with the triune God (and one's fellows), the One from whom all goods flow. In this life, action that accords with the life-giving forces of God runs into the obstructions posed by our world as a realm of death – forces promoting impoverishment, suffering, exclusion and injustice. One is called to act to counter such forces in the effort to bring in another kind of life.

This action cannot, moreover, be delayed in hopes of more propitious circumstances to come. Action is present oriented and therefore realistic. One must work with what one has and that means figuring out the present workings of the world, with, for example, the help of the physical and social sciences, in order to intervene as best one can.

Action has an urgency, moreover; every moment counts. As scientists describe it, the world does not have an indefinite extension into the future; nor will a second chance for action come again by way of a future reinstatement of the world now suffering loss. In religious terms, 'the source for every gaze towards the future is life today, in fellowship with God.' Future hopes do not lure us away from a concern with the present; 'the religious depth of the present is in fact the only thing that can offer grounds for [those future hopes].'³⁵

Failure to succeed is not, however, a reason for despair.³⁶ Certainly, if our action is not primarily motivated *by* hopes for success, the failure of those hopes is no cause to give up the fight. But to the extent our hopes *are* for the furthering of God's blessings through our own action, those hopes can be sustained even in the most dire and hopeless of circumstances; one can continue to hope in God, and specifically in God's gift of eternal life since that is not conditioned by those circumstances or by our own failure because of them. The motor of blessings and of our own action to promote them – eternal life – is something already achieved without us, not something our action brings about, and therefore our hopes in it are not subject to disappointment when our actions fail to have the effects we desire. A hope, then, to counter despair in the present comes not from the idea that God himself is the coming future; but from the fact that despite appearances to the contrary in a world of sin, God has in fact already assumed our lives in Godself. What draws our action and the world ever onward is not a future running ahead of us but a steadfast and unshakable rock (Christ) as the source of that movement, the fund and fountain of what should be an ever expanding feast.³⁷ On the basis of the fact that in Christ we already have all we need to do so, on the basis of the fact that even now we live in God as Christ does through Christ's mercy, we can hope to have done our part before the end of time. Indeed, we can continue to

³⁵ Ibid., 800.

³⁶ See Schillebeeckx's very interesting remarks on failure: *ibid.*, 823–32.

³⁷ See Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, trans. A. Malherbe and E. Furguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), sections 243–4: 'here the ascent takes place by means of the standing. I mean by this that the firmer and more immovable one remains in the Good, the more he progresses in virtue. . . . [I]f someone, as the Psalmist says, should pull his feet up from the mud of the pit and plant them on the rock (the rock is Christ who is absolute virtue) then the more steadfast and unmoveable . . . he becomes in the Good the faster he completes the course.'

hope in the world's (and our) further benefit after that end comes but this is no hope in the world in itself, for that world ends (and has already ended *as* something in and of itself); it is a hope in the world whose new identity essentially means nothing other than life in God.

Indeed, in the interim before the world ends, for our part we should expect defeat as much as success. One with Christ who in his mission of benefit suffered humiliation and defeat to all appearances at the hands of the powers, we must prefer defeat to success everywhere that such success means being favored by death-dealing forces at work in human life. In keeping, once again, with the way death and life are relativized by a religious sensibility in both Old and New Testaments, better to go to the cross in faithfulness to the mission of a gift-giving God, than to reap the riches of a kingdom of death:

[T]o be sacrificed is . . . as long as the world remains the world, a far greater achievement than to conquer; for the world is not so perfect that to be victorious *in the world* by adaptation to the world does not involve a dubious mixture of the world's paltriness. To be victorious in the world is like becoming something great in the world; ordinarily to become something great in the world is a dubious matter, because the world is not so excellent that its judgment of greatness unequivocally has great significance – except as unconscious sarcasm.³⁸

- Allchin, A. M., 36 n.4, 37 n.7
 Anderson, B., 112–13
 Aquinas, Thomas
 Christology of, 24, 30 n.70, 31 n.72,
 44 n.32, 48 n.44, 54 n.62
 on creation, 3 n.4, 20 n.40, 100 n.6,
 101–2
 on death, 118 n.29
 on incarnation, 8, 12, 36 n.3
 Arius, Arianism, 44 n.32, 52 n.54
 Athanasius
 Christology of, 18 nn.33 and 35,
 19 n.36, 22 n.45, 27, 27 n.58,
 51 n.51, 52 n.53, 53, 54 n.60
 on covenant, 46 nn.38 and 41
 on creation, 43 n.29, 118
 on humans, 80 n.30, 115 n.22
 on incarnation, 2, 2 n.6, 5, 22 n.45
 on Trinity, 39, 39 n.14, 41 n.22, 46
 n.37, 52 n.53
 atonement
 means of, 28–30, 29 n.64, 74, 76,
 87–8, 93, 107–8, 114
 vicarious, 29, 87, 87 n.40
 Aulén, Gustaf, 29, 29 n.67
 Bailey, L., 104 n.10, 106 n.11
 Baillie, D. M., 5 n.6, 7 n.9, 8 n.12
 baptism, 51, 55, 60, 73



Index

- Barth, K.
 Christology of, 7 n.9, 8, 17 nn.30–1,
 22 n.46, 25, 26 n.56, 27 n.61, 31
 n.72, 48 n.43, 50 n.47, 51 n.52, 52
 nn.54–5, 67 n.1, 75 n.18, 87 n.41
 on covenant, 45 n.34, 50 n.47
 on creation, 45 n.34
 on ethics, 59, 60 n.77, 61 n.77, 63
 nn.84–6, 64 n.90, 68 n.3, 71
 nn.9–10, 72 nn.11 and 13, 73 n.15,
 75 n.19, 77 n.25, 85, 121 n.33
 on God in relation to world, 6 n.7, 20
 n.40, 37 n.5, 69 n.6
 on God's transcendence, 11–12, 73
 on incarnation, 6 n.7, 12, 27 n.59, 28
 nn.62–3, 29 n.64
 on Jesus Christ in relation to humans,
 37 n.5, 54 n.61, 55 n.63, 56 n.67, 57
 n.68, 58, 59, 59 nn.70–3, 60 n.74,
 61 n.77, 63 nn.85–6, 64 n.90, 71, 72
 n.13, 77 n.25, 120 n.32
 on Trinity, 13 n.23, 14 nn.24–5, 51
 n.52, 52 n.54, 76
 Baxter, A., 25 n.55
 Berkhouwer, G., 55 n.65, 61 n.77, 71
 n.10, 72 n.12, 74 n.16, 76 n.21, 77
 n.24
 Bernard of Clairvaux, 20 n.40, 41, 44
 n.33, 45 n.36, 64 n.89

³⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. H. and E. Hong (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 288.