

Asking New and Old Questions As We Remember the Future

Marva J. Dawn

Let me explain my title, “Asking New and Old Questions as We Remember the Future.” Because my training is in biblical ethics, my approach to various worship concerns centers on *asking questions* (the proper work of ethics) about how our worship practices form us to be God’s people. If we are interested at this conference in what our “eschatological tradition” has to say to issues of worship, then we will discover the more new questions we ask, the more they will drive us back to the old ones. Indeed, “there is nothing new under the sun.” Always, throughout human history, we have been strung between the times, between who we have been formed to be by our past and what we might become, especially if we consciously and deliberately orient our present toward the future. Moreover, since the resurrection, which provides the ultimate definition of our Christian faith and life, God’s people have always lived—whether we realize it or not—in the midst of the tension of “already, but not yet.”

The problem is that in recent times many Christians individually and corporately have not realized that this eschatological tension defines us. This is why we are gathered together for these three days: to recover that fundamental Christian tradition—and our conference planners mean the word *tradition* in its best sense. I apologize to you at the outset that some of the questions I must ask will be painful—they have driven me to shame and repentance while preparing this keynote—but the questions are necessary and urgent if we are going to recover the eschatological tradition of the church in ways that will affect our worship and if we intend to take seriously our calling as present participants in God’s kingdom and therefore as servants of God and of God’s church.

Why Has the Church Forgotten Its Eschatology?

This first question is essential if we would recover the church’s eschatological tradition for the sake of its worship. I first began noticing our loss of eschatology in table prayers. When I was a child we always sang, “these mercies bless and grant that we may feast in paradise with

thee.” Now at camps, congregational dinners, and family events we seem only to sing, “that we may strengthened for thy service be.” Of course, there is nothing wrong with asking for strength for our labors today, but why is it that we seem to be ashamed to think about feasting in paradise? Why do we so rarely sing about the future anymore?

When was the last time you heard a sermon about heaven? Even at funerals messages usually degenerate into proud acclamations of the dead person’s personality and a recital of the beloved deceased’s accomplishments, greatly aggrandized. Why are we and our churches somewhat embarrassed about the topic of God’s great future? We *must* ask why.

Some of our reasons for shying away from eschatological talk are very good ones. For example, it was terrible that churches used “heaven” as a message to console those we oppressed. Many seemed to think, “Give the slaves a hope for glory and their masters can continue to exploit them now”—never realizing the slaves knew far better than their owners that God’s great future has radical repercussions on the present. So African-American spirituals evolved, which unfold, and enfold us in, true eschatology—songs about Moses to teach us that the prophecies of the past foretell a better future, songs about crossing the Jordan in the future to represent the rivers to traverse on the freedom trail now. From spirituals, then, we can often learn a better eschatology than that which was distorted by churches in order to maintain their power.

Some of our other reasons for ceasing to talk about eschatology were very good ones. We can’t mention them all, but think of these: in many churches and books, ideas about “heaven” were stretched far beyond the biblical testimony; the Revelation of John was turned into a calendar by which human beings could outwit God; ethics for the “end times” became an excuse for immorality now; or, in Nietzsche’s critique of churches, eschatology became a means for denying the natural world or escaping our responsibilities for it. We are faithful if we reject these unbiblical, untheological, unethical eschatologies.

But why have we discarded genuine biblical eschatology as faithfully understood in the church’s heritage? Some of our reasons for ceasing to talk about eschatology were devastating to the community and its gifts to the world. As we look at Christian history, we discover we gave in too much to modernity; we allowed the Enlightenment project of proving everything scientifically to dissuade us from our proclamation of the reign

of God and of how that reign has come crashing in to our epoch.¹ Why did we let extreme uses of historical-critical tools atomize texts until they were no longer capable of forming a people living in the present by remembering God's past provision and therefore believing God's promises for the future?

Hans Frei's insightful book, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*,² warns us about what we are doing. Whereas formerly the scripture texts were what judged our human experience and our understanding of the world, we in the modern epoch allow the interpreter's experience and worldview to judge and criticize the text. This is a paradigm shift that we must regret, and if we ask our first question diligently—why have Christians forgotten their eschatology?—it will expose our idolatries.

When we look at the history of the development of modern thought, beginning with Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Kant and others, focusing especially on Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, and continuing all the way to the present postmodern philosophers such as Foucault, Lyotard, and Derrida, we recognize the progression culminating in the current abhorrence of anything approaching transcendence.³ We are extremely blessed at this gathering to have Jürgen Moltmann with us, for he is one of the great leaders to expose the fallacy of our rejection of eschatology.⁴

My first point, then, in raising questions concerning the relationship of eschatology and worship, is to urge us to ask personally, corporately, and ecclesialogically why we have failed to keep God's future prominent

¹A participant at the institute questioned my use here of the word *crashing* in favor of the usual verb, *breaking*. I prefer the former only for its wake-up effect. God's reign usually does come more quietly, but we are so lulled by enculturation that we don't recognize the kingdom's presence and don't live its present way of life against the inimical "values" of the society around us. See Marva J. Dawn, *Is It a Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church's Children* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997).

²Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

³See especially Brian D. Ingrassia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology: Vanquishing God's Shadow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴See especially Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (New York: Harper Collins University, 1991) and *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

in our theology and our lives, and to recognize in that omission many of the idolatries that are now destroying the worship of the church.

Why Do Our Neighbors Turn to False Eschatologies?

It is ironic that even as churches have rejected eschatological thinking, many of our neighbors—in all generation groups—have turned to it with eager zealously. In the annual *Word & World* lecture at Luther Seminary on Sept. 23, 1997, Gustav Niebuhr, Senior Religion Correspondent at the *New York Times*, asked, “Why does millennialist prophecy hold a particular appeal now?... Could it be that a certain level of pessimism in contemporary American culture gives a permission to end-of-the-world thinking?”⁵

Niebuhr acknowledges that “talk of massive social decline is fairly well accepted as fact.” He lists some of the common concerns as follows: “Start with a near collapse in standards of civility, move to concern that educational standards are falling, then to fear that family life is deteriorating, and finally to the worry that the environment is being permanently degraded.” On the positive side, he notes a cultural change “in which personal faith seems suddenly more public, in which the general atmosphere seems more friendly to its expression.”⁶

However, the turn to thinking about the end times because of social decline plus an environment more sympathetic to religiosity do not add up to more effectiveness on the part of our churches. Niebuhr comments:

The poll numbers tell us that the will to believe is alive. But they offer no evidence that religious institutions have the same degree of influence over people’s lives than they exercised 30 years ago, or that many people have kept up an attachment to the denominational bodies that served to organize and guide religious life throughout much of this century. A problem for national church organizations these days is that we live in a time suspicious of institutions and their authority.⁷

Consequently, churches are not trusted for—and often do not offer, as we recognized in the first point of this lecture—an eschatology that deals with the reality of social decline. “This attitude [of “more general distrust

⁵Gustav Niebuhr, “American Religion at the Millennium’s End,” *Word & World* 18/1 (Winter, 1998), 7.

⁶Ibid., 8.

⁷Ibid., 9.

of or alienation from sources of authority” also] coexists with a heightened sense of spiritual individualism” that “places the satisfaction of personal needs above maintaining traditional loyalties. Herein lies a major challenge for the churches.”⁸ Congregations are not ministering to our society’s panic and fears, especially because we have rejected or hidden our eschatological tradition in favor of meeting [supposed] immediate needs.

One of the best ways we can see our society’s millennialist panic and apocalyptic thinking is in the literature of the younger generation. Let me highly recommend to all pastors, musicians, and other church leaders Douglas Coupland’s book, *Generation X*. Reading this novel, subtitled *Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, I found myself sobbing over the pain expressed by the three main characters—who have all given up on their previous jobs and lives to move to the desert and tell each other stories. In one of their conversations, two of the principals admit the following:

“You know all of this sex gossip and end-of-the-world nonsense, I wonder if they’re really only confessing something else to each other.”

“Like?”

“Like how scared sick they all are. I mean, when people start talking seriously about hoarding cases of Beef-a-Roni in the garage and get all misty-eyed about the Last Days, then it’s about as striking a confession as you’re ever likely to get of how upset they are that life isn’t working out the way they thought it would.”⁹

What a great grief it is that our churches are not responding to the discouragements and frustrations of people in their twenties and thirties in the society around us!

In fact, eschatological yearnings have been expressed throughout the cultural breakdown of the last half of the twentieth century.¹⁰ That is one of the reasons that postmodernism has arisen, as explained in my keynote lecture in 1997. There is no longer any basis for truth, since the idolatries of science, technology, and economics have failed us by not solving all the

⁸Ibid., 9–10.

⁹Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1991), 37.

¹⁰See also chapters 6 (The Revenge of the Sacred in Secular Culture), 12 (The Death of Utopia Reconsidered), and 18 (Revolution—A Beautiful Sickness) of Leszek Kolakowski’s *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 63–74, 131–145, and 215–224.

world's problems as many claimed they could. What we have reaped instead are the terrors of world wars, Auschwitz and Hiroshima, political chaos, rampant immorality, government deception, and so forth. Responding to the atrocities and horrors of the world war, William Butler Yeats penned these lines in his oft-quoted poem, "The Second Coming":

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight...

There is indeed an enormous need in our society for an eschatology that can give hope in the face of the world's mayhem. What would it be like for ministry to our neighbors if the church could recover its true eschatology—both made clear in, and therefore making clear, the church's worship? That leads to the third set of questions.

What Happens to "Spirituality" without Eschatology?

What has happened in churches is a lot of degeneration into pop spiritualities. Cynthia A. Jurisson, professor at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, writes of "Pop Spirituality" in *Word & World* and names it for the attempt at self-improvement that it really is. In most of contemporary spirituality's various forms Jurisson recognizes "foolproof coping mechanisms to deal with the hassles of modern life that hinder the pursuit of success." She underscores that "Unlike the earlier self-help literature, however, which had an implicit eschatology, much of the current popular literature, despite its use of terms like 'spiritual awareness,' lacks

¹¹William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," *Chapters into Verse: Poetry in English Inspired by the Bible*, ed. Robert Atwan and Laurance Wieder, Vol. II: Gospels to Revelation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 376.

any eschatological dimension.”¹² Throughout the country and across the denominations I have heard countless sermons that were only therapeutic, that offered merely suggestions for self-improvement, instead of faithful proclamation of the reign of God.

Why is it that our churches deliver human remedies, instead of proclaiming God’s hope and God’s salvation (in the fullest sense of that term)? Why do we fall into the most popular of eschatological replacements and the worst substitute of all for heaven—materialistic consumerism? Philip Rieff, in his book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, laments that “Religious man was born to be saved, [modern] psychological man is born to be pleased.”¹³ How dangerous it is, then, if churches let their worship degenerate into whatever is pleasing.¹⁴ Why do churches not stand mightily against the ethos of the U.S.? As God’s people, formed by God’s reign, we know better than to chase after the god of Mammon. Why have we let the idolatry of consumerism invade our churches, as is evidenced by worship that caters to instant gratification or simply offers music that sells?

¹²Cynthia A. Jurisson, “Pop Spirituality: An Evangelical Response,” *Word & World* 18/1 (Winter, 1998), 15–16.

¹³Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), 24–25.

¹⁴I would highly recommend that pastors and musicians and other worship leaders read some of the literature written in protest of U.S. consumerism. From a non-Christian and sometimes very cynical perspective, Ferenc Maté’s *A Reasonable Life: Toward a Simpler, Secure, More Humane Existence* (New York: Albatross Publishing House, 1993) awakens us to how dissatisfying and false the “salvation” of consumerism is. Maté gets quite vitriolic at times because he doesn’t have the hope of the reign of God, but many of his suggestions are quite practical as he asks why we let ourselves be turned stir-crazy by our endless pursuit of stuff. From a Christian perspective, see Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community: Eight Essays* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993) and Rodney Clapp, “The Theology of Consumption & the Consumption of Theology: Toward a Christian Response to Consumerism” in *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & the Consumer Culture*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 169–204. Both sources call us to Christian discernment of, and responses to, the lures of our advertising and inundating materialist society.

How Will Eschatological Thinking End the Confusions of Evangelism and Worship?

What might a recovery of the church's eschatological tradition contribute to clarifying the difference between evangelism and worship? (As emphasized in my keynote in 1997, the confusion of these two in many churches has led to the detriment of both.)

Some of the confusions are illustrated in Walt Kallestad's book, *Entertainment Evangelism: Taking the Church Public*¹⁵ and pointed out in a review of it by Frederick J. Gaiser in *Word & World*.¹⁶ Let me emphasize three aspects of the church and the church's worship that are presented in destructively unbiblical or theologically mistaken ways in Kallestad's book and which could be rectified with faithful eschatological thinking.

First, in Kallestad's book—and in much of the literature that confuses worship and evangelism—there is no significant discussion of the relation between style and subject matter. The result is that, in Gaiser's words, there is no concern for how “adopting an entertainment style baptizes the content of a culture of diversion.”¹⁷ If our worship merely offers a diversion, we have lost the eschatological call to involvement in the world's needs and investment of ourselves for the sake of God's ministry purposes. Instead of being distracted from the needs of our society, eschatology plunges us into them because the reign of God gives us the courage, the strength, the tools, and the power of the Spirit at work through us already to care for our neighbors' sufferings. Worship is not to escape, but to encounter. As we worship we are changed, so that when we leave the worship service we go out to change the world.

Second, Gaiser points out that Kallestad does not deal with the problem of a “star clergy” and the “cult of personality.” He asks, “Is the system itself compatible with a New Testament notion of Christian

¹⁵See Walt Kallestad, *Entertainment Evangelism: Taking the Church Public* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

¹⁶Frederick J. Gaiser, review of *Entertainment Evangelism: Taking the Church Public* by Walt Kallestad, in *Word & World* 18/1 (Winter, 1998), 102–106.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 104.

community?”¹⁸ This question is critical these days because worship in so many churches and at larger gatherings has turned increasingly to what I call “patter”—small talk that makes the worship leader sound like a radio talk-show host. The great gift of liturgy (in whatever style of music we use) is that it takes our consciousness off the person leading it and focuses our attention instead where it belongs—on the God whose words we speak and sing. Preachers with a charismatic personality who confuse worship and evangelism concentrate on how they can attract people with what they do in the corporate gatherings and forget that worship is intended to praise God and to equip the congregation to introduce their neighbors to Christ. Rather than creating a “cult of personality,” those who serve to enable others to worship ought to be like Paul’s old “clay jars” (2 Cor 4:7), so that “it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” Eschatological thinking always reminds musicians and pastors that it is the reign of God which draws people to Christ and not the star organist, guitarist, or preacher. It is the Word of God that speaks to hearts and not the manipulative chatter of human beings.

Third, Gaiser points out that Kallestad’s book contains no serious mention of sin and evil.¹⁹ Many of the worship services I encounter in my travels to do my theological work focus on “happiness,” instead of offering the true joy of sins forgiven. As Walter Brueggemann asserts, “The problem with a hymnody that focuses on equilibrium, coherence, and symmetry ... is that it may deceive and cover over. Life is not like that. Life is also savagely marked by disequilibrium, incoherence, and unrelieved asymmetry.”²⁰ Faithful eschatology enables us to confront sin and to look evil straight in the face. We are changed by the forgiveness of God and set free by grace to renounce sin, resist evil, conquer oppression, endure suffering. Our present participation in God’s future kingdom gives us the courage to be realistic about the present workings of the principalities and powers in our world, for we know that they are already defeated and that someday God will annihilate them forever.

¹⁸Ibid., 105.

¹⁹Ibid., 105.

²⁰Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, Augsburg Old Testament Studies (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 51.

How Can We Relearn the Language of Eschatology in our Worship?

Since eschatological thinking is a critical aspect of our identity as Christians, how will we recover its language? What educational methods can we use? How will worship help us recover the language, and how will that recovery deepen our worship?

In order for the church—or any other community that nurtures an alternative way of life substantively different from the larger society—to maintain itself, sociologists recognize we will need rituals, procedures, practices, habits, customs, and, most of all, a language that tell us who we are, that remind us of our identity, that uphold and nurture our vision of how we are different and why that matters. Are we passing on to our children and to our neighbors in our worship such a language of faith?

Edward Farley's profound book, *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation*, uses the eschatological notion of hope as his final example of a "word of power" that has been eroded, diminished, and allowed to atrophy in the modern and postmodern world. Building on his previous discussion of tradition, obligation, the real, and law as other deep symbols infected and affected by the culture around us, he writes,

Again, the word of power is not the term itself but the deep symbol that finds its way into a variety of expressions: the kingdom of God, Messiah, second coming, the promised land, resurrection, utopia, the new aeon. Along with faith and love, hope is part of Paul's trilogy of Christian existence. One form of hope, prophetic eschatology and the theme of Messiah, is at the heart of the faith of Israel. Some [such as Paul Ricouer, whom Farley cites] maintain that hope is the very core of the Christian kerygma. For Kant, "What can I hope?" is one of the three great questions human beings ask.

If this word of power is now threatened, everything else is threatened with it ...²¹

Farley's is not a "self-help" book; he's not going to give you six easy lessons (remember that six is the biblical number for sin) in deep symbol repair. Farley will not help us quickly manufacture a technological fix to enable the language of faith to convalesce. But he calls our attention to the need for major efforts on our part to recover our faith tradition's "words of power." I am sure you are all aware of how so few persons in our culture understand the deep signs and expressions of Christianity.

²¹Edward Farley, *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 95.

For example, last week at a synod assembly I met for a while with the youth convocation and asked the young people, since it was on my mind in preparation for this keynote, why we don't talk about heaven anymore. Their answers included the fear they would be laughed at by their peers, so I asked them whether heaven is a place or a time. Their response was wonderful; it was quiet for a moment of stunned silence and then several said, "That is a *good* question!" Because of previous destructive infections of the idea of heaven as a place, we have lost the sense of it as an epoch, as God's reign breaking into the present aeon, as eternal life already begun. We can recover these deep symbols, as Farley urges us, if we center on, sort out, and embody them again in new ways appropriate to the times in which we live.

Our own liturgy helps us recover the deep symbol of eschatology. This is not to argue for a certain style of music, but I love the *Lutheran Book of Worship* settings of the ancient *Sanctus* (sung by angels in Isaiah 6 and by the children when Jesus entered Jerusalem) and of Revelation 5. When we teach people where these hymns of praise are from in the scriptures, what they mean, why we need to envision God's reign in both the future and the present, and with whom we are singing, we will enable those we teach to love these songs, too. Similarly, in our sermons we do not have to be afraid of our identity; we need not think that sermons have to provide instant gratification, but we can instead instruct richly and thereby recover the substance of the church's deep symbols. Young people especially are starved for deeper content.

Children's sermons also provide a great opportunity to recover deep symbols. We can teach eschatology on Palm Sunday by asking the children how they would welcome Jesus if he walked into our sanctuaries. Imagine what we might do for "Christ the King" festival, throughout all of Advent, and on Transfiguration Sunday in teaching the children about the reign of God both now and in the future. Every Sunday is rich with potential for recovering both eschatological hope and other deep symbols of the faith. We have a powerful tradition, but it needs to be recovered with a tradition of expressions and practices.

How Do the Heavens Worship?

Another way to pose this sixth set of questions might be to ask what we can learn from cosmic praise. So many of the biblical psalms suggest that our praise will always be inadequate—so we have to encourage the trees to clap and the mountains to dance, too. Numerous passages in the

Old Testament call on the heavens to join us in praise or urge us to chime in with the worship of the whole cosmos, for, indeed, God's worthiness requires all the forces of the heavenlies to contribute to his adoration. Consequently, in these texts we get a sense of the "already, but not yet" of worship. Eschatological visions pervade both testaments of the scriptures; for example, one of the assigned texts for my devotions this morning was Psalm 2, which reminds us that the king is already on the throne.

When we look carefully at how the heavens respond to God's reign, we find many hints for how we might worship now in practice for the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises. What can we learn from the worship of angels? What do they express in their songs, and how might that teach us about true praise?²²

How Will Eschatological Worship Convey the True God?

In my earlier book on worship, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, I emphasize that the most important question we must always ask about any form or piece of music or sermon in our worship is whether it keeps God as the subject and object of our corporate gathering. This will never change: our fundamental criteria must always be how what we do in worship enables us to encounter the true and living, reigning God.²³

In recent times the eschatological dimension of our faith has often been missing, so we have lost our sense of awe before God. We miss much of God's grace when we fail to envision his reign; we displace his power. We turn our sermons into therapy instead of proclamation. We discuss our "journey," but forget that it is dependent upon God's journey to us. Don't tell me what I must do to make my journey better or more enjoyable; remind me instead of how graciously and compassionately God has come to us, how his powerful and merciful reign has broken into our world. The result of that will be the formation of my journey, but we will wander aimlessly or along the wrong paths if we are not first changed by God's advent and then transformed into his way of life.

²²Notice especially that the angels never sing about themselves or their feelings, but always about the character of God. See Marva J. Dawn, *Joy in our Weakness: A Gift of Hope from the Book of Revelation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994).

²³See especially chapter 5 (God as the Center of Worship: Who is Worship For?) in Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995).

How Will Eschatological Worship Form Us, Personally and Corporately?

This eighth question points to the other two major criteria I offered in *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*; besides keeping God as the focus of our worship, we who lead it also craft its elements and forms in order to nurture the character of the followers of Jesus and to build up the community to reflect God's ways in our corporate life.²⁴

If our worship is oriented by the present and future reign of God, it will form us to be dependent—in contrast to our culture, which always wants to be in control. We will be formed to be churches that are humble, instead of competing to be successful. We will be nurtured to be people who are repentant, joy-full in our forgiveness, and eager for direction—aware of our insignificance and yet of our critical importance for God's purposes, aware of the immensity of God's sovereignty and yet of his intimate care for us. For example, what might it mean to worship a God who can hold all the waters of the earth in a single palm and yet gently carries the lambs in his arms? How does it change us to worship a God who can name the stars and call them out so that not one of them is missing?²⁵

How would it form us if our worship imbued us with the eschatological sense that all of us carry the reign of God wherever we go? This eighth set of questions is intended to call for a major paradigm shift in our churches. I want every single person in our pews to know that when he or she leaves this place, they all go out to *be church*. We don't "go to church"; we *are* the church. How would it affect the society around us if all the people in our congregations knew that wherever they go they bring with them the presence of God in proleptic envisioning of the fulfillment in glory and power of all his promises? We go to the grocery store differently if we know that; we get on the bus with an alternate sense of things if we remember that. We live distinctly if we live eschatologically.

²⁴See especially chapters 6 (The Character of the Believer: Having Content or Being Content?) and 7 (The Character of the Church as Christian Community: What Is At Stake?) in Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*.

²⁵See chapters 11 (The Cry of *YHWH's* Gentleness), 12 (Our Cry of Wonder), and 26 (The Cry of Personal Significance) in Marva J. Dawn, *To Walk and Not Faint: A Month of Meditations on Isaiah 40*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997).

How will our worship equip us, personally and corporately, for that eschatological way of life?

How Will the Recovery of Eschatology Extricate Our Churches from Our Destructive Battles Over Taste?

A corresponding question might be “Is heavenly worship for everyone?” Recently I received an invitation for an evangelism conference which is going to feature worship one evening oriented for “boomers” and another night for “X-ers.” It does not at all seem to me a very good model and preparation for heaven if we cannot sing together now across generation lines. Perhaps we have to rewrite Galatians 3:28 these days to stop this ridiculous division of our churches according to tastes. Instead of “there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, bond nor free,” now perhaps Paul would declare “there is neither boomer nor X-er, neither traditionalist nor lover of jazz, neither guitarist nor organist, neither young nor old, neither black nor white, but everyone has gifts to contribute to the praise of God and the well-being of the communion of saints.”

Why Is Eschatological Worship a Royal Waste of Time?

We have to question the present emphasis on utilitarian worship, evidenced by frequent comments concerning what we “got out of” a particular worship service. Recently I was invited to give an endowed lecture at Westminster Choir College, where the department of sacred music is no longer as prominent as in times past. At a luncheon the day before my presentation, one of the young men present asked, “With all the current emphasis on pop music, are we just wasting our time here?” As a result I rewrote my chapel address for the following morning and titled it, “A Royal Waste of Time.” Sue Ellen Page, whose work with children’s choirs is especially helpful,²⁶ asked afterward whether that might someday be the title of a book, which seemed to be divine intervention to channel my writing into a different project.²⁷ That title is intended to contradict the

²⁶Sue Ellen Page, *Hearts and Hands and Voices: Growing in Faith Through Choral Music* (Tarzana, CA: H.T. FitzSimons Company, 1995).

²⁷See Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time: Essays and Sermons Worship-Full* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999).

notion of worship which, according to the review I cited last year, is created to be like Burger King because that “meets the needs.”²⁸

How will we re-teach our congregations that worship is not intended to accomplish anything? How will we learn again simply to stand in the presence of God and to bask in the immensity of God's reign over all of life and the future? Furthermore, by God's grace our future will be perfect and lived fully in the presence of God; consequently, all our present worship is inadequate and a waste of time. It won't at all change God's opinion about us. It won't earn us any points with God; he will gift us anyway with the kingdom.

Does that cause us to give up? Does that allow us to think that anything goes? Or does that challenge us always to respond by growing in constantly developing excellence, to praise this immensely gracious God with the very best we can offer? Because the future is present and operative, how can we best imagine it? What does that say about Burger King style worship?

Why Is Sabbath-Keeping Important for Eschatological Worship?

Since sabbath-keeping is preparing for the final rest of God's reign, a foretaste of eternity, there is a very deep need for the church to recover sabbath-keeping as the day-long setting of our morning worship. My book on the subject came out almost ten years ago and still results in letters and comments from people who say that it has changed their lives to practice sabbath-keeping. It is essential that we encourage members of our congregations to continue remembering that the whole day of Sunday is a day for God, and then we will end this silly practice of running worship by the watch. Perhaps we could demand everyone take off his/her watch when entering the sanctuary, and then we won't hear any beeps telling us the time is up.

In our culture there is a frantic need—with emphasis on the word *frantic* because our technological milieu constantly increases its pace—for true rest, for a genuine ceasing from the madness and frenzy of our society, for a better set of values, a way of life to embrace, for an unfeigned feasting that is true celebration and not merely an attempt to suppress the

²⁸See my paper from the first year of this series, “Culture: Around, Against, In the Church's Worship.”

profound pain of our lives.²⁹ How will we plan, and participate in, worship so that members of our congregations recognize the worship service as only one part—albeit the most important one—of an entire day of getting ready for the future by practicing now the traditions of the past and the reign of God in the present?

How Well Do Our Sacramental Practices Reflect Our Eschatology?

Since the sacraments practice the presence of the future, this question will lead us to important reflection on how often we savor the Lord's Supper, on how well we highlight it as a major mark of our identity. We must also contemplate the place of baptism in the context of our worship services and congregational life. Do we understand baptism as the beginning of the eternal reign of God in the individual's life, as a welcoming into participation in the kingdom of God, and therefore as a transformation of the baptized's life and a responsibility for the whole community to nurture an eschatological way of life?

How Will Eschatological Worship Deal with Suffering?

How will we deal with suffering in our worship services if we know that in the future, which we begin to experience now, all sorrow and sighing will flee away? In the confusions about what worship really is that characterize many churches in our times, suffering is often suppressed or ignored in the singing of "happy songs," rather than engaging in honest, genuine lament and rather than recognizing that God's reign changes the way we approach and deal with suffering. If we could just learn a theology of weakness—one piece of the more comprehensive theology of the cross—rather than reverting to the theology of glory that pervades many worship services these days, we would be more faithful to the God of the scriptures, the way of life of God's people, the realities of our broken world, and the truth of God's ultimate victory over pain and sin and death at the close of time.³⁰

²⁹See Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989).

³⁰See Dawn, *Joy in Our Weakness*.

How Will Eschatological Worship Convey the True Hope of the Gospel?

We live in an age desperate for lasting hope, struggling to find some basis for hope. How can we capture in our worship more thoroughly the hope of God rather than human hopes and opinions? Many of the definitions written in the margins of Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* poignantly illustrate the hopelessness of the young adults of that era who wonder how to find meaning and a future in a nuclear-threatened, consumerism-drowned, technologically frenzied, relationship-bereft society. In one conversation by two of the principal characters about their parents, Andy says to Dag,

*I try and talk about things like nuclear issues that matter to me with my parents and it's like I'm speaking Bratislavan. They listen indulgently to me for an appropriate length of time, and then after I'm out of wind, they ask me why I live in such a God-forsaken place like the Mojave Desert and how my love life is. Give parents the tiniest of confidences and they'll use them as crowbars to jimmy you open and rearrange your life with no perspective. Sometimes I'd just like to mace them. I want to tell them that I envy their upbringings that were so clean, so free of *futurelessness*. And I want to throttle them for blithely handing over the world to us like so much skid-marked underwear.³¹*

This is the cry of many people in their twenties and thirties as they look at the political and economic chaos in our world, at the lack of possibilities for a job in their chosen profession, at environmental degradation, at the loss of all moral authority: "How can we carry on when you have left us such a messed-up world?" They are starved for hope.

Let's not simply give them phony pats on the back and manipulate their feelings into coziness. Let's instead give them the true hope that is not entertainment, nor escapism, nor diversion, nor a consumerist appeal to taste, but that teaches us instead a realistic appraisal of sin and evil, that reminds us of the victory of Christ over sin and evil at the cross and empty tomb, that enfolds us in the presence of God's reign in the world now, that challenges us to participate in that reign in ministry to our world, and that assures us of the truth that someday God will usher in his kingdom in all its fullness. Let us recover the church's eschatological tradition, worship richly in light of that tradition, and thereby give such a hope to our neighbors who are yearning for it!

³¹Coupland, *Generation X*, 85–86.