Eschatology: Pie in the Sky Bye and Bye?

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I began this series of lectures by reflecting on the profound changes that have taken place in the field of theology in the four decades since I first began studying this discipline. At that point, I remarked that many of these changes have to do with the faces and the cultures of the people doing theology. But these changes have also affected the very content of Christian theology, as I have also tried to illustrate in the previous two lectures. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the matter of eschatology or, as it is often called, the "doctrine of the last things."

When I first began my studies, no aspect of Christian theology was as neglected as eschatology. During my years in seminary and graduate school, I had courses on Christology, on ecclesiology, on anthropology, on soteriology; but never in all those years did I take, nor was I offered, a course on eschatology. This was because most of my teachers, both in seminary in Cuba and in graduate school at Yale, were convinced that eschatology was not worth discussing. It was something to be left to dispensationalists who were trying to discover whether we were in the fifth or the sixth trumpet, or whether the Soviet Union or the British monarchy were the beast. Eschatology was the domain of feverish prophets who believed they had found the clue to the

Book of Revelation, so that now they could predict the date of the Second Coming. And, even apart from such extremes, most of my teachers, both in seminary and in graduate school, were convinced that eschatology played a negative role by telling people that there would be "pie in the sky bye and bye," and that therefore they should not oppose or resist present injustice, for their present patient suffering would be rewarded in the sweet bye and bye.

I must confess that to a large extent I am the heir of these teachers, and that there are still certain forms of so-called Christian eschatology that I do not think deserve the name of Christian theology, and in which I have no interest except insofar as they undercut Christian obedience, or twist Christian hope to the point that it is no longer recognizable as such. To put it in a nutshell, the "Left Behind" series leaves me behind, and I have no desire to get on that train.

Two features in much of this widely popular sort of eschatology must be denounced and rejected. The first is that the attempt to determine the time when the end will come is not, as many seem to think, an invitation to greater obedience, but exactly the opposite. When I was a

child, sometimes my brother and I would stay at home while our parents went to work. They left all sorts of instructions as to what we were to do before they returned at six in the afternoon. Because we knew that they would not be home until six, we felt perfectly free to play and waste our time in any way we pleased; and then, a few minutes before six, we would rush to get everything in order and make it look as if we had done nothing but obey our parents' instructions. Likewise, if I know that Jesus is coming in the year 2010, I still have over five years to do as I please. Such postponed obedience is not the true purpose of eschatology.

The second negative feature is that, while claiming to take the Bible very seriously, such eschatology actually undermines the authority of Scripture. If the Book of Revelation is about Saddam Hussein or about OPEC, it was not the Word of God for its first readers, nor was it the Word of God for anyone who lived before Saddam or before OPEC. Thus, this sort of eschatology, while claiming to take the Bible seriously, takes it seriously only for our time, and turns much of it into worthless mumbo-jumbo for those who lived in other times.

Yet, when it comes to eschatology, as well as in every other aspect of Christian theology, things

have begun to change. As part of that change, it is time to reclaim and to reinterpret eschatology. One of the foremost theologians of our time, Jürgen Moltmann, has long been promoting eschatology, in the sense of the specific Christian hope, as a starting point for theology. When asked to write a book on eschatology for a series of books on various Christian doctrines, an African-American friend and colleague, Gayraud Wilmore, gave it the very appropriate title of "Last Things First." By this he was expressing a growing consensus, that eschatology is not the realm for feverish visionaries' way out in left field, nor does it have to play to the interests of rancid conservatives way out in right field, or of otherworldly escapism remaining in the bleachers of history. Eschatology, properly understood, stands at the very foundation of Christian theology and of Christian life.

In spite of all of this, we still have serious problems with eschatology. Not just with people who try to determine the date of the end, or who the beast is, or whether we are in the sixth or the seventh trumpet, or whether the millennium comes before or after the great tribulation. We have problems with eschatology.

One reason for this is that the modern worldview, almost by definition, excludes eschatology. Modernity has taught us to think in terms of the present being the outcome of the past, and the future being the outcome of the present. We have been taught to think of the universe as a great machine, a closed system in which one wheel moves another, and that one in turn moves another, and so on *ad infinitum*, so that nothing happens that is not purely the direct result of what happened before. This makes so much sense to us, that we find it difficult to view the world otherwise. And yet, it may be that this is the greatest obstacle in the way of Christian hope for us today, and that this is precisely the foundational myth, the crucial metanarrative, that we must question if we are to know hope again.

To counteract such a metanarrative, allow me first of all to point out, as a historian of ideas, that this is not the way most of humanity has understood life and the world most of the time. Indeed, what we call "causes" in this modern mechanistic worldview are just one of the two main and complementary ways in which people through the ages have understood causality. What we call a "cause" is what the ancients would call an "efficient cause": a billiard ball moves because another hit it. This is the realm of the physical sciences. If a physicist sees a billiard ball

moving, the question to be asked is, "What pushed it?" And the question never to be asked, nor even conceived within the realm of the physical sciences is "What pulls it? Where is it intended to go?" Yet, there is nothing that forces us to believe that things and events move only because they are, so to speak, pushed from the past, and not also because they are pulled from the future, from a goal towards which they move.

This second way of thinking about causality is what the ancients called the "teleological cause," the end towards which a thing or an event moves. Perhaps in contemporary language we would say the "purpose." Strange as it might seem to us brainwashed moderns, to think in terms of teleological causes makes just as much sense as to think in terms of efficient causes. When we ask, "Why?" what follows the answer, "Because..." can refer to something in the future just as well as to something in the past. The question, "Why are you going to Yale?" may be answered "Because my father went there." But it may also be answered, "Because I want to be a lawyer."

Or, for those of you who prefer more sophisticated examples, the evolution of species may be explained, as Darwin did, on the basis of purely efficient causes, particularly the survival of the

fittest; but it can also be explained, as Teilhard de Chardin did, on the basis of the teleological goal of all being, as the result of the movement of all of creation towards its end, its purpose, what Teilhard calls the "Omega point."

Now this sounds very abstract. But it is of crucial practical significance. Or, to put it in the opposite way, these notions of causality have much to do with the agendas that hide behind them, with the interests they serve and the hopes they foster. You may remember that in the first of these lectures I spoke of how different views of God and of divine perfection reflect different views of society and its perfection. Those for whom society works, those who tend to think that the social order, if not perfect, works rather well, are inclined to see God's perfection as changelessness—a changelessness that has no power and no intention of changing society. In contrast, those who are oppressed, those who have a memory of their slavery in Egypt, those who live on a small strip of land repeatedly conquered either by Egypt on one side or by Mesopotamian empires on the other, conceive the perfection of Yahweh as intervening in history for justice and for liberation, for judgment and for correction. Likewise, the difference between an understanding of causality as limited to efficient causes, and one that still holds to

teleological causes, has much to do with contrasting socio-political agendas.

If the world is a closed system of efficient causes, much like a machine where no part moves unless another moves it, and where all that happens is the result of what happened before, there is little hope for those who are, not just oppressed, but even excluded from the present system. If all that happens is the result of what has gone before, if there is no purpose guiding history, what hope is there for those whom the present order excludes? If there are no causes but efficient causes, those who control the present will also control the future, for they control the causes of the future. And the other side of that coin is that those who are exploited in the present order, and even more those who are simply excluded from it, have no real hope, for the future will bring nothing but more of the same. Thus, the notion that there are no causes but efficient causes, which to us, children of the modern age, seems purely logical, self-evident, and reasonable, serves to preserve a status quo which is anything but reasonable, which is evidently unjust, and whose logic is a logic of death.

This is why it has been said that colonialism is the armed version of modernity.[1] The great ideological weapon of modernity was the notion that true knowledge should and could be absolutely objective, and therefore universal. Obviously, the field of knowledge where such an ideal is most closely approached is the mathematical sciences and their application in the physical sciences. It was these physical sciences that allowed the West to develop the instruments that made colonialism possible—the steamship, the railroad, the telegraph. But Western colonialism and expansion, just as much as ancient Roman imperialism, needed to justify itself. Imperialism seldom presents or sees itself as a naked conquest based on the power of the mighty to conquer and to overwhelm the weak. Imperialism always seeks to justify itself as a benevolent force in the midst of a suffering world, as a promise of enlightenment for a benighted world. To state it very briefly, imperialism wraps itself in an ideology that supposedly justifies it. Alexander set out to conquer the world with the stated goal of bringing the benefits of Greek civilization to the rest of humankind. As an ideological successor to Alexander, Rome convinced itself that it was not just grabbing power because it could, but because it had something of value to share with the rest of the world. Rome was the hope of the world. Just as Rome could not tell the world, nor itself, that it was building an

[1]Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery under Colonialism (Delhi: OUP), p. xiv.

empire because it had its legions, the modern colonial powers could not tell the world, and much less could they tell themselves, that they were colonizing the rest of the world because they had the power to do so. A justification was needed, and each colonial power developed one. Typical of such justifications is the oft-quoted British view of the "white man's burden," which went something like this: "Since we white men have been blessed by such knowledge and expertise, since we have the solution to so many problems, it is our responsibility to share these advantages with the rest of the world." Although such justifications for modern imperialism varied from country to country, in general all colonial powers—and after the end of colonialism, the neocolonial powers—justified their policies in terms of "development." According to this view, the rest of the world was "underdeveloped," and it was the responsibility of the "developed" nations to help the others develop. If much of the wealth and resources of those "underdeveloped" nations ended up in the "developed" world, this was not the intended purpose, but a byproduct of the process. And so the myth lives on, that there are developed and underdeveloped nations, when in truth there are developers and developees—those who control the efficient causes of economics, politics, and power, and those who are controlled by them—and the result is the mis-development of the whole.

The success of modernity was phenomenal. People throughout the world became convinced that they were "underdeveloped," and that the only way they could be developed was by being part of the colonial and neocolonial systems. Just as we were passing from colonialism to neocolonialism, some of the elites in former colonial territories joined the game. They learned how to employ the physical sciences and the resulting technologies that had given the West such prominence and joined the club of the "developers." In some cases, their nations even became part of the small number of nations that control much of the wealth of the world. In many cases—practically throughout the world, in China, in Iraq, in Central America—the technologies that had formerly been used to promote and uphold international colonialism were now employed to promote an inner colonialism, where national elites exploited the masses, to the point of making some of them expendable. Most of these elites are secure in their positions, knowing that they control the causes of future events, and that the future will bring nothing but the outcome of the present.

Thus, we could say that one reason eschatology has fallen into disrepute and disuse is its incompatibility with modernity. And that is certainly part of the picture. But I suggest to you

that there is another, often hidden reason for our dislike of eschatology. That reason is a deeper fear that we ourselves carry—a deeper fear that we hide behind our rejection of bowls of wrath and seven-headed monsters. The real reason why we neglect and even reject eschatology is not that it has become the domain of feverish minds inflamed by the joy of destruction. The real reason is that we are so well installed in the present order that we do not wish it to end.

Look again at the early Christian community, at the eschatological hope, for instance, of those churches in Asia that were the original intended readers of the Book of Revelation. When Revelation was written, Christians were a tiny minority in the midst of one of the largest empires the world had ever seen. In the midst of the vast Roman Empire, this small group of dissidents emerged, claiming that the hope of the world was not in Rome, but in a Jewish carpenter condemned to death by Rome, under an accusation of subversion and sedition. It did not take long before they too were considered subversive, particularly since they refused to worship the gods that supposedly had made Rome powerful.

What sustains people such as those early Christians, constantly swimming against the mighty

stream of political power and public opinion? How could they remain faithful when it meant they would lose most of their friends, probably also lose their livelihood, and perhaps even their life? What makes it possible for an aged bishop in Smyrna to stand before the authorities and before the populace and, knowing full well that it would cost him his life, confess his faith and even rejoice in it? What makes it possible for two women in Northern Africa, one a young matron and the other her slave, to see themselves as sisters in Christ, and to stand firm in their faith, marching on to death, in spite of multiple entreaties and threats? The answer, as in the case of some of the most profound questions of life, is quite simple: What sustains them is hope.

It was in such a situation that the Book of Revelation was written. It was in a similar situation for the people of Israel that the Book of Daniel was written. For their first readers, these were books of hope. Essentially, what these books told them was: The present order under which you now live will not last forever. It will not have the final word. The final word belongs to God. There is much around you calling you to submit to the present order, to play according to its rules, to seek success within it. Know, however, that the option that you have chosen, the

option of faith and faithfulness, even though it leads through humiliation, suffering, and all sorts of difficulties, is ultimately the way to victory. For this order will pass. God will overcome all God's enemies, and the divine purposes will be fulfilled. You, whom the present order sees as the scum of the earth, you are the victors of the future, for the future is in the hands of the One who died and rose again. The powers of evil, the powers of Empire, and even the powers of misguided religion, conspired to destroy him, and on that Friday that we dare call "Good" they even thought they had succeeded. But God will not be conquered. Nor will you be conquered, you who remain faithful even through the present age.

It is for this reason that the Book of Revelation, believe it or not, is a joyful book. It is for this reason that, the Psalms aside, no other book of the Bible has inspired more hymns than the Book of Revelation. It is a book of angels singing in heaven, of multitudes rejoicing and waving palms of victory, of tears being wiped away, and of death itself being killed. What John sent to his beleaguered sisters and brothers in the churches is Asia from his own exile on Patmos was a word of hope, a long hymn of praise to the Lamb who was slain and yet lives, an assurance that their prayers, rising like incense in the evening, reached the very altar of God, a promise that

their voices would join the choirs of angels and the great multitude that no one can count.

Imagine yourselves living in those times—in Roman times. Convincing itself that it is bringing order and civilization to the world, Rome has devised a system in which the wealth of the nation's flows to the center. The famous black wool from Sardis, the eye-salve from Laodicea, the parchments from Pergamum, all contribute to Rome's wealth. As all such empires do, this movement of wealth has been organized in such a way that there are some in each of those cities who profit from the arrangement, and who therefore are unconditional supporters of the empire. These are the local elites, the ancient aristocracies whom Rome has confirmed in their positions of privilege, the *nouveaux* riches who have attained their position by collaborating with Rome. Below them are the working masses, whose toil enriches both the imperial center and the local elites, but scarcely suffices to feed them. But even among them some have a sense of privilege, for they are members of craftsmen's guilds that give them the right to work in certain trades, and to produce and sell certain goods. The system works quite well. It works particularly well precisely because it convinces most people that it works in their favor. True, ownership of land is increasingly concentrated in a few hands, most of them powerful investors

from far-away Rome. True, since the land is being devoted to produce wine and olive oil for exportation the price of wheat has increased twelve-fold, and the price of barley has multiplied by eight, while wages have remained the same.[2] True, there is a growing floating urban population made up of those who have had to leave the land on which their ancestors worked for generations. True, taxes are so high that many become homeless fugitives, abandoning their families and their meager holdings. But from the point of view of Rome, and of the many who are convinced that the Roman order is beneficial, all of this is a small price to pay for the blessing of being under Roman rule.

Now in the midst of that society a Christian community emerges. From all we know, most of the people who joined this community came from the lower echelons of society. And if they did not, their faith quickly placed them there. If they were in trade or in crafts, they could no longer remain as active members of their craftsmen's guilds, for the life of those guilds centered on the worship of their own particular divine benefactors. A guild meeting was also an act of worship to the guild's patron god. To become a Christian implied refusing to worship other gods than the One Creator of all things, and therefore Christians could no longer participate in the

[2]For a discussion on this rate of inflation, and how Rev. 6.5-6 refers to it, see Justo L. Gonzalez, For the Healing of the Nations: The Book of Revelation in an Age of Cultural Conflict (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), pp. 81-83.

guilds. This meant they could no longer work in the trade that until their conversion had been their livelihood. They had families to feed. The temptation was great to abandon the faith, or at least to compromise it. Why not burn a pinch of incense, or sacrifice a goat, before an idol, if this is necessary to keep your job and your livelihood? What hope do we have, we who are but a small band of believers, at the bottom rungs of the social ladder, in a small provincial town within the mighty Roman Empire?

There's that word again: hope. Christian eschatology is about hope. The Book of Revelation, which these hard-pressed Christians received from their leader exiled on the island of Patmos, is above all a book of hope. Its first readers read it thinking of the day when the present order would pass, and all would be well.

But imagine then this book falling into the hands of a Roman governor, or anyone else in the elite that profited from the existing order, or even someone involved in a craft or a trade who was convinced that the order was good. They would have a hard time understanding the book. And this, not only for the obvious reason that scholars have repeatedly told us, that the book is

written in a sort of code, with symbols whose meanings would be clear for its intended readers, but not for others. The book would be hard to understand for an even deeper reason: it would be hard to understand because a powerful or contented reader could not imagine how anyone could be as alienated from the existing and supposedly benevolent order as these Christians seem to be.

This is precisely what has happened with the Book of Revelation in particular, and with the entire notion of eschatology in general. Beginning in the fourth century, Christians got comfortable. The powerful embraced Christianity, and eventually became its leaders. It became respectable and acceptable to be Christian. Soon Christians came to have such an investment in the present order that the Book or Revelation, rather than a book of hope, became one of fear.

Significantly, even though the Book of Revelation apparently was read in the churches of Asia Minor ever since it was written, it is shortly after Constantine that the first objections against it begin to appear. The book is too bloody, some said; it is too crass; it is vindictive. But even though it was not usually confessed, the real reason why the book was objectionable was that it depicted Rome as a great harlot drunk in the blood of the martyrs. The real reason why the

book was objectionable was that it spoke of a hope far beyond—and in some ways even contrary to—the best that the Empire, even a Christian Empire, could offer. The book was objectionable because it put hope, not in the hands of the Emperor and his court, but in the hands of the poor and the marginalized who worshiped the Lamb. From the new position in which Christians now stood in society, the book became one of fear rather than hope.

And it is thus that we have been taught to read, not only the Book of Revelation, but all of Christian eschatology. It is a matter of fear. Eschatology is about the earth being burnt, and the sea turning red, and horses with tails that bite like scorpions, and beasts with seven heads. And so those of us who consider ourselves a bit saner than the rest have good reason to ignore it, to leave it to preachers of doom, to those who are sick enough to rejoice in terror.

Eschatology in general, and the Book of Revelation particularly, have fallen into the hands of Christians who no longer look at life and at society, so to speak, "from below"; they are being interpreted by a church that is so settled into the present order that it can no longer understand the deep yearning of people whom that order systematically oppresses, excludes,

and even ignores. It is almost as if a Roman governor were given the task of trying to interpret the expectations of Christians in his province. My professors who thought that eschatology was at best meaningless, and at worst alienating, could not understand the power of eschatology because they were too close to the center of the empire. They were among those who, even unknowingly, profited precisely from the order that eschatological hope sees as a passing order. I agreed with them, and to a large measure I still have difficulty with eschatology, not so much because I do not understand this point or that, or because I find the Book of Revelation cryptically mysterious, but because I too benefit from this passing order. The real, deep reason why I have difficulties with eschatological hope is not that it promises "pie in the sky bye and bye," and meanwhile does nothing about the misdistribution of pie here on earth. The real reason is that I benefit from that misdistribution, that I enjoy its benefits, and therefore find it very difficult to put myself in the shoes of those who have no pie and no food, and whose only hope is in the bye and bye. In his Confessions, Augustine tells us that he used to pray: "God, give me chastity. But not just now!" We hear this, and we snicker. But the truth is that we regularly pray: "Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," and then we silently and even unconsciously add a footnote: "But not just now!" Why would we want the order of God's Reign, when the present order suits us just fine? That is the real reason why we

ignore, dislike, and even fear eschatology! Because eschatology speaks of the end of an order that we find quite convenient.

Today, however, when the majority of Christians are no longer in that part of the world that most benefits from the existing order, and when even in the economic and political centers of the world there are an ever increasing number of Christians who are systematically excluded from the benefits of the present order, we have the opportunity to listen to them, to let them teach us the true meaning of eschatological hope and, precisely through that deep unity of the church, through that reflection of the divine *perochoresis* that we were discussing yesterday, to come to understand the hope of "the least of these," and the future for which that hope yearns. It is this that I invite you to do tonight.

At this point, it may be helpful to pause for a moment and explain what I mean by referring to people who are "not just oppressed, but even excluded." A few years ago, in a conversation with some Christian sisters and brothers in Central America, one of them said: "Our problem is not that we are exploited. Our problem is that we are expendable. For many of us, to be

exploited would be a privilege." He then went on to explain that in his village the few people who could obtain work, no matter for what wages, were a minority, and the rest of the village envied them. Most people in the village had seen prices go up as a result of their nation being more involved in world markets, but their earning power had remained the same. Leading nations and corporations in the present order look to the poorer nations of the world as a source for raw materials, for cheap labor, and for new markets. But, what about those people, millions upon millions, who cannot make it into the labor force, and who therefore will never be consumers? They simply do not count. They are expendable. Do you remember your studies on church history, and how it was customary in the Roman Empire to abandon unwanted children, girls and crippled boys, or any who were seen as just one more mouth to feed? They were set outside, exposed to the elements, in the expectation that they would die of cold or starvation, or be killed by dogs and wild beasts, or in the best of cases be picked up by someone, and raised to be slaves or prostitutes. Remember how the early Christian writers condemned such practices? Well, today there are millions, not just children, but also adults, mostly women, who are practically set outside, to die of starvation or to linger in hunger and disease. In ancient Rome, the lucky ones were picked up to serve as slaves or prostitutes. What my Central American brother was saying is that in today's order, the lucky ones join the labor force, to be

exploited with miserable wages, to work in unsanitary conditions, to be set aside as soon as age or infirmity make them less productive. This is why, even though it is falling out of favor, I still use the phrase "Third World," although not exactly with its traditional meaning. I use it in a sense parallel to the phrase "fifth wheel"—as that which is deemed useless and disposable. There is a first, supposedly "developed" world, trying to develop a second, supposedly "underdeveloped" world. And then there is a Third World, the world that is excluded from all but the worst consequences of the emerging global order.

Back then to the subject of eschatology: here again, these new theological perspectives do not arise out of theological speculation, and certainly not out of reading the Bible as a divine crossword puzzle whose solution lies in Scoffield's notes, but out of Christian communities whose situation is very similar to those of the early Christians who first wrote and read books such as the Revelation or Apocalypse of John.

For the oppressed and for the excluded masses, a world and a history that are a closed system of cause and effect offer no hope. If the future will simply evolve from what now is, it promises

to be as drab and hopeless as the present or perhaps even worse.

It is for this reason that eschatology has come to the foreground among Christians whom the present order marginalizes—and don't forget that these are now the vast majority of Christians. Go to a Pentecostal or Roman Catholic church in a *favella* in Sao Paulo and announce that you will be speaking about the Gospel of Matthew, and some will come to listen to you; but announce that you will be explaining the Book of Revelation, and the masses will come. For many Christians in such places, the only hope lies in the purposes of creation and of history being fulfilled. This will not happen without divine intervention, breaking down the order that now exists, an order that seems to hold global sway and yet excludes so many. In other words, this will not come about as the mere unfolding of efficient causes, but through the intervention of the final cause of all things, the future that is calling history to its fulfillment, the Reign of God. Thus, the prayer rises from a million huts and hovels, and rises with more fervor than I have ever prayed it: "Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done."

Needless to say, much of that eschatological expectation has questionable dimensions.

Impacted as they have been by the overwhelming preponderance of the West, not only in economy, politics, and science, but also in missionary work, many of these Christians, yearning for an eschatological hope, are still looking to the West for their interpretation of the future that is to come. Thus, dispensationalist schemes from the 19th and 20th centuries, "Left Behind" fiction, and all sorts of attempts at fixing the date for the final events abound throughout the Third World, just as they still abound in the supposedly developed world. This sort of eschatology must be rejected, as I pointed out at the beginning, because it undercuts both obedience and the authority of Scripture.

But there are other dimensions of this eschatological hope that give it power and direction, and on which we do well to join the expectations and to learn from the insights of the disenfranchised Christians of the Third World.

Today the entire church, the church catholic, the church that speaks to us from *ghettoes* and *barrios*, from Namibia and from Bolivia, is inviting us to look at the nature of Christian hope—of that hope that stands at the very heart of eschatological expectation. It is inviting us to try to

look at it as those early Christian who first read the Book of Revelation understood it, or as those millions who today eagerly and really pray "The Kingdom come" understand and live it.

When we look at Christian hope through those eyes, the common usage of the word "hope" is not strong enough. The word "hope" is used so often and so easily that it has lost most of its power. Almost at the very beginning of 1 Peter we read that we have been "born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1:3). The words "living hope" merit our attention. This is not just a hope that is now alive but could be killed by adverse circumstances. A parallel construction in the New Testament is "living rock," which refers to the firm layer of rock beneath the soil. And "living water" means water that is running, water that cannot be stopped. Thus, a "living hope" is not just a passing hope. It does not have the same meaning as when I say, being a resident of Atlanta, that I "hope" the Braves win tonight. When I say that I hope the Braves win, what I mean is that I would like for the Braves to win, but that the outcome is still in doubt. When 1st Peter speaks of a "living hope," this is a hope as firm as "living rock," and as unstoppable as "living water." It is a hope grounded, not on our likings or on our calculations, but on what Christians declare to be the greatest event in human history,

the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a hope so certain, that what 1st Peter, and the Book of Revelation, and all of Christian preaching through the ages, are inviting us to do is to stake our lives on it. I certainly would not stake my life on the Braves winning tonight! Yet, those early martyrs, those many witnesses through the ages, those missionaries through whose testimony we have come to believe, all Christians now and in the past, who truly claim the promises of the Gospel, must take this leap of faith, and stake our lives on this living hope, on this Kingdom for whose coming we pray.

When this happens, this hope is a "living hope" also in the sense that it is a hope out of which we can live. In many ways, we all live, not only out of our past and our memories, but also out of our hope. People come to seminary in the hope to use their education in some form of ministry. Professors teach in the hope that their students will somehow be influenced and enriched by their teaching. I came here this evening in the hope that there would be someone to listen to me. And you came in the hope that, strange as it may seem, I might have something to say. All of our decisions, from the smallest to the greatest, we make in view of what we hope will be their outcome.

The "living hope," of 1 Peter is both an unshakable hope and a hope one lives by. If having a *living* hope is being absolutely certain of it, then it also means *living* out of it. If life is lived, not only out of the past, but also out of the future, not only out of efficient causes, but also out of teleological expectation, then the more certain that expectation is, the more it will guide the present. If Olympic athletes find the stamina to spend years and years of arduous training in the distant and uncertain hope of winning a medal, believers find their stamina in the unshakable expectation of that Reign of God for which we pray daily. Or, as St. Paul put it, "they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable." Hope is about seeing beyond the present and living out of the future. Eschatology is about resistance. It is this that many Third World Christians are beginning to discover. And it is in this discovery that much of their astounding power lies.

Then, 1 Peter says that we have this "living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Christian hope is not primarily about the end of the world. It is not about bowls of wrath or seven-headed beasts. It is about Jesus Christ. It is hope grounded on the memory of the One we already know. It is hope for the establishment of the Reign he announced and

inaugurated. When we pray "Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done," we are not addressing an unknown "Thou." The Thou we address is the One who has addressed us in Jesus Christ. The Thou we address is the One we have seen feeding the hungry, healing the sick, speaking to the outcast, forgiving his enemies, dying on the cross, rising again... While we wait for him, we know that we are called to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to pay attention to those whom the present order considers disposable outcasts, to forgive our enemies, to love even unto death, in the certainty that, just as he lives, we too shall live with him. Again, as Paul would say, we "do not run aimlessly, ... do not box as one beating the air." We know who it is that will wipe away every tear from our eyes, who it is that has killed death, who it is that shall reign when the former things have passed away... And so, with those early Christians who first read the Book of Revelation, with those disenfranchised millions whose only hope lies in the Lord, we are invited to pray once more, but to pray with all our hearts, "Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done… *Maranathá*. Come, Lord Jesus!" Amen!