

# Theology Matters

## The Being and Nature of the Unborn Child

by Thomas F. Torrance

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*“He is not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being”* (Acts 17:27-8). That statement about God endorsed by St. Paul applies to the unborn as well as to the born. Every human being has been created by God body and soul. Each is addressed by his Word. Each is made in correspondence to himself. So we reflect him through a unique relation to himself that transcends our creatureliness. This relation is constitutive of our distinctively human being and nature. This applies to each one of us from the very beginning of our conception and existence in the womb, not as a body and a soul, but as a body-soul unity, as an *embodied soul* and a *besouled body*.

Like all created things human being is corruptible, may disintegrate and cease to exist. Nevertheless, human being is continuously sustained in existence by the beneficent will and creative presence of God, and is thus given immortality through the grace of a relation with God who only has immortality. God alone is uncreated, perfectly self-sufficient Being, eternally existing in himself in an utterly transcendent way that surpasses our power to comprehend. He is without beginning and without end: to be immortal is the natural and intrinsic property of his Being. All other being is deficient in existence and naturally mortal with a finite beginning and a finite end,

and is thus utterly dependent on the goodness of God, the Lord of all being, in the order and temporality of its existence. So far as human being is concerned, however, owing to the distinctive integration of his/her soul and body, a continuing personal life after death includes the body as a basic equation of existence. Hence in Christian theology immortality is inseparably bound up with the resurrection of the whole human being as a body/soul unity, and is described as a creaturely participation in the uncreated eternal Life of God.

The whole universe with its rational order to which human beings belong has been created by God out of nothing and is contingent. Far from being closed in upon itself, it is open, and as such points beyond itself to the Creator. Within itself the universe comprises a hierarchy of different levels of creaturely existence and rational order. While each level is open at its boundary conditions to understanding from a higher level, all creation is open toward God in its nature and order. With all animal being, human being is a living organism or an animated body. But unlike animals, human being is a rational constituent of the creation within its contingent rational order. As such we are ultimately to be understood not from an independent center in ourselves but only from above and beyond ourselves in a unique relation to God. Unlike other

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### Table of Contents

“The Being and Nature of the Unborn Child” . . . . .	p. 1
“Stillbirth” . . . . .	p. 5
“Apocalyptic Perspectives on the Cosmic Struggle for Life Against Death” . . . . .	p. 10

creaturely beings, human being is constituted a rational subject and agent, that is, a subject-being or person, living in inter-personal relation with others. Through his Spirit, God sustains his human creatures and makes them open for fellowship with him. He reveals himself to them through his Word, and makes it possible for each one in due course to respond personally to his address. God adapts his gracious presence to human beings all through their lives, from their conception in the womb, then as embryos, then as children and later as adults, in ways appropriate to the different stages of their earthly existence.

### Identifying the Transcendent Source

Our particular concern here is with the being and nature of the unborn child as a besouled body or an embodied soul from the very beginning of existence in the womb of the mother. The unborn child is already a human being “in germ,” as it were, even though only the size of an apple pip. That is to say, the human being is already genetically complete in the womb from the moment of conception, when the body and soul of the new human being grow together within the womb of the mother and in living relation with her. The human genome thus come into being is laden by the Creator with all the information that is needed for complete development.

While that information is more than would fill the largest encyclopedia, it is yet incomplete and indeterminate in itself, and is thus not explainable in terms of its components. However complicated it may be, it cannot of itself account for the way in which the embryo is shaped and develops. There is and must be some all-important factor, a regulative power, a controlling source of information which bears upon the human nature and life of the developing embryo from the beginning. This controlling factor may be spoken of as a some kind of *metaplan*, a term, which may be borrowed from the physicist Paul Davies in his book *The Cosmic Blueprint*.

Where does the information content of the human genome come from? That must surely be related to the transcendent source and ultimate ground of the rational order with which we are concerned in the formation of all physical laws, for which physical laws themselves cannot account. Einstein once spoke of this as the supreme *Why*, or the ultimate justification of physical law. There is an ultimate rational ground to what happens in the universe, which we cannot formulate in our physical laws. In all our scientific formulation of the laws of nature, we have to presuppose a transcendent *order* for which we cannot give any account, but which we have to assume in all attempts at proof or disproof. That is why we cannot but take into account a controlling source of information in the conception and orderly development of each cell in a human embryo, that is of some “metaplan” or “metaorder,” an organizing principle.

Let me repeat here what I have written elsewhere in *The Soul and Person of the Unborn Child*. However wonderful

and complicated the DNA may be, it cannot of itself account for the enormously greater complexity of the many parts of one’s physical body. Where does the information content of the genome come from? It does not and cannot be produced by accident or through random self-organization in natural processes, for the information is of such an intelligible complex nature that it must have an intelligent source. There is and must be a regulative force, and indeed a controlling source of information, something over and above our genetic composition which bears upon the human nature and life of the developing embryo from the moment of conception, from the very beginning of its existence in the womb. This is the creative source which the Bible speaks of as the *Word of God* by whom all things were made, in whom was life and the life was the light of human being.

It belongs to the very heart of the Gospel that the Word of God who was the eternal Son of God, of one being with the Father, and through him all things were made, chose in his love to become incarnate in Jesus Christ, was conceived through the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and became a true human being. It is surely to him who became a holy embryo in the Virgin’s womb, and was born of her to be the Savior of the world, that we must go, in order as Christians to understand what the unborn child is as an embodied human soul, and as one loved by the Lord Jesus who came to be the Savior of the human race. The eternal Word of God become incarnate *was and is himself the metaplan*, the creative and regulative force in the birth of each human being, come among us as one of us to be Lord and Savior of the human race!

### Christ’s Virgin Birth and the Unborn

The virgin birth of Jesus is an essential part of the Gospel of salvation. For through it, Jesus was made one of us and one with us in such a way that he healed and sanctified in himself what he had assumed from us—our humanity—thereby recreating, humanizing, and personalizing it. That is why leading theologians in the early Church, followed by John Calvin at the Reformation, rightly traced the root of our redemption, not only to the death and resurrection of Christ, but to his very conception and birth of the Virgin Mary. It was because in Jesus the Creator Word of God was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, that Christians came to regard the unborn fetus in a new light, sanctified by the Lord Jesus as an embryonic *person*.

Hence already in the first century the Church added to the sixth commandment, “You shall not commit infanticide, nor procure abortion” (*Didache* 2.2). Those early Christians took to heart the words of the Lord Jesus about little children: “Suffer the little children to come to me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 19:14). “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; but whoever offends one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for to have a millstone fastened round his neck and that he be drowned in the

depth of the sea” (Mt. 18:5-6). “See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that their angels do always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 18:10). That teaching of the Lord Jesus about our behaviour toward little children was held to apply no less to the unborn than to the born, for in his incarnation the Lord Jesus had himself been an embryo in the womb of the Virgin Mary, of whom he was born as Jesus to be Immanuel, God with us the Savior of humankind.

Unfortunately more attention throughout the history of churches in the East and the West has often been given to the Virgin Mary herself than to the One conceived in her womb and begotten as our Lord and Savior. That has contributed, like the neglect of the Virgin birth of Jesus, to a widespread failure to have due concern for the unborn child brothered by the Lord Jesus.

The Virgin Birth cannot be understood apart from the whole mystery of Christ, from the union of divine and human nature in his one Person already complete in the womb of Mary. The nature of Jesus’ unborn Person was not different from the nature of his divine-human Person born of his mother at Bethlehem. His birth of the Virgin Mary may well be regarded as the outward sign, the historical form in humanity which the creative and saving entry of the Son of God took, when he assumed our human nature in union with his divine nature, but it was much more than a sign. The sign points to the mystery of Christ, the only begotten Son of the Father, incarnate in the world of space and time, and bears witness to it, but the reality of the Virgin birth is more than the sign. The reality is the union of true God and true man in Christ the creative Word of God and redemptive activity of God. But if the Virgin birth is a true and appropriate sign, the outward sign of the inward reality belong together as a form and content of the Incarnation. Thus the Virgin Birth attests and corresponds to the nature of what it signifies, and to the nature of the healing and redemptive work of the Savior throughout all his life from conception and birth to his death and resurrection.

It is highly significant that the earliest text of John 1:13 referred to the Virgin birth of Jesus not in the plural but in the singular. “Who was born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God”. And it is in that light that the third chapter of St John’s Gospel about the need for us to be born from above or again through the Spirit, is to be understood. The birth of Jesus was of vicarious and redemptive significance. That means that our new birth is to be understood in relation to the birth of Jesus himself.

I believe that the doctrine of the Virgin birth of Jesus and its redemptive significance must be recovered for a proper understanding of the redemptive life and mission of Christ, but also for our grasp of its import for us about the

nature and status in his eyes of the unborn child. As he became a human being for us, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, lived and died on the Cross and rose again for our redemption, so, I believe, we must think of its importance for our understanding of and regard for the unborn child, everyone of whom has been brothered by the Lord Jesus. In becoming a human being for us, he also became an embryo for the sake of all embryos, and for our Christian understanding of the being, nature and status in God’s eyes of the unborn child in his/her body and soul. To take no thought or proper thought for the unborn child is to have no proper thought of Jesus himself as our Lord and Savior or to appreciate his relation as the incarnate Creator to every human being.

### **What Science Tells Us of The Unborn**

Let us consider the being and life of the unborn child as we now know of him/her in relation to some of the things we have been learning in recent years about the human fetus. This is particularly significant for us today, for our relation with the Lord Jesus in his conception began with our own conception. And our relationship with him in his birth began with our own birth, not only with our new birth, although that is to be understood, as we have noted, in its ultimate root in the birth of Jesus himself “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” He is himself the transcendent source of information become flesh as one of us, the creative Word of God become man, in accordance with whom each of us was conceived and formed in the womb of our mother. In accordance with him, each of us is given birth and life through our mothers and fathers. As such the Lord Jesus is also our incarnate Savior who has a fellow feeling with us in all our infirmities. His healing and redemptive power we must not forget when we learn from our medical scientists, gynaecologists and physicians about what they tell us of the life and experience of the unborn child.

It is significant that the term “compassion,” so often ascribed to the Lord Jesus in the Gospels (and echoed by St Paul), is a rendering in Greek of the Hebrew expression (*rahamim*) for womb. As Savior, the Lord Jesus bears toward all those in weakness, pain, and need, but in a divinely intensified degree, something like the visceral feeling which a mother has toward the babe in her womb. He, the creative Word and transcendent source of the all-important information in the formation of every human being in body and soul, the Lord and Savior of mankind, who was born flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, is himself the incarnate *metaplan* in continual dynamic relation between the Creator and every living human person!

Here are some of the facts which research has brought to our attention by gynaecologists, pediatricians, and other medical scientists, which must affect our attitude to the human fetus. In the advance of our science, as we have become aware, for example, through Albert Einstein, the

damaging dualist fallacy which has affected so much modern thought, especially in the psychological and sociological sciences, is being steadily rejected for a more holistic approach. Thus a non-dualist unitary conception of human being is being reached, supporting the Jewish/Christian understanding of human being as embodied soul and ensouled body.

Far from being little more than a bundle of living tissue, the unborn or preborn child early reveals evidence of a consciousness of his/her mother, with sufficient self-awareness to react through bodily movement to her hands and her voice in loving care, and also to that of the father along with the mother. Indeed, already within a few weeks of its life, the fetus gives evidence, discernible in movements of the brain, of recognizing and having a memory of parental behaviour, in emotion and sound, and reacts in response. Thus the child in the mother's womb responds with evident delight and memory to the caressing and singing of the mother. Moreover it is now known that any tune repeatedly played to the baby in the womb is learned by the baby who recognises it after birth. It is particularly interesting to find that the unborn child reacts especially to the mathematical music of Mozart rather than to loud cacophonous sounds, as it does also to discord between the mother and father! Moreover, the fetus has the ability even to sense the mother's withdrawal of love, and has enough self-awareness to sense abortion attempts on the part of the mother, with the will to react to them. Even at twenty weeks gestational age the unborn child quite definitely responds to pain and suffering and reacts in distress.

What I have written here is only a very little of the greatly increased knowledge we now have of the life and behaviour of the unborn child, but it is enough to prompt us to consider two very important points.

### **Personal Being**

First, the kind of interrelation discerned between the preborn child and his/her mother indicates the development already of what must be called *personal relations*. The unborn child is *in parvo* a personal being. The concept of person was not known in ancient culture, in the East or in the West, but comes from Christian theology. It derives from the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one Being, three Persons. In him the divine Persons are who they are through their interrelations in being and act with one another. While that notion of "person" applied originally and strictly to the Triune nature of God, it came to be applied to creaturely human beings, in such a way that the relations between human beings constitute what they are as persons. Persons are what and who they are in the interpersonal relations of their One Being with each another. Unfortunately that concept of the person and of the personal within dualist patterns of thought, ancient and modern, came to be defined in individualist and rationalist patterns of thought, and then in legal and psychological ways when its profound ontological

significance became submerged. That is particularly evident in the romantic and subjectivist notion of "personality." As a result, the personal became excluded from scientific thinking, so that even the personal participation of the scientist's mind, as Schrödinger and Polanyi lamented, was excluded from scientific thought, although it is actually through the mind of the scientist as person that all scientific research takes place and scientific knowledge is achieved.

There is another side, however, to the history of the person and the personal evident in the scientific work of James Clerk Maxwell. When faced with the problem of explaining the behaviour of the electromagnetic field, he found that he could not do that in a mechanistic way. Then he took over the idea from Trinitarian theology that relations between persons belong to what persons actually are, and applied that dynamic interrelation to explain how particles of light are what they actually and dynamically are. And in so doing he advanced the epoch-making concept of the continuous electrodynamic field, which Einstein claimed brought about the greatest change in the rational structure of science, and on which his own and all subsequent science rests. Why, then, should we not think of the personal being of the unborn child in that kind of dynamic and ontological way, in interrelation with his/her mother? If that kind of interrelational way of thinking was so effective in the scientific account of the behaviour of inanimate light particles with one another in a continuous dynamic field, why should we not think of it as applying effectively to a deeper understanding of the interrelation of the body and soul and personal life of the fetus in relation to the mother?

It is surely now evident that it is through loving personalizing relation with the mother that the tiny personal being of the fetus is nourished, and its embryonic response to the mother, especially in recognition of her voice. Is that not after all what we read in the Gospel account of how the embryonic being of John the Baptist leaped in the womb of his mother Elizabeth when she was greeted by the Virgin Mary? I believe that through fuller understanding of the unborn child in the unity of body and soul, and in the personal relatedness of the child to the mother particularly, we can deepen and advance what we learn from the researches of medical scientists in our understanding of the personal life and behaviour of the unborn child. In that event is not abortion an act of murder, and a grave sin against the Lord Jesus?

### **Pain and the Unborn**

Secondly, we return now to the fact that the unborn baby feels pain and reacts to it, for example when a needle is plunged into the baby's body or when undergoing an operation in the womb. There are people who question whether the unborn baby actually *feels* pain. However, that seems to be an equivocal question governed by conceptions of what the self and self-consciousness are in their own psychological perception of child or adult experience. As the distinguished nurse Margaret

Sparshott, in Britain has pointed out, it has now been found that a fetus is actually able to feel pain, and does in fact react sharply to it. It is now established that fetuses have all the necessary central nervous equipment for pain experience, and that their experience of what is called pain is *painful*. Even at twenty weeks gestational age, the unborn child definitely reacts to distress, pain and suffering. And, as I have already pointed out, the unborn child has been found to have enough self-awareness to sense abortion attempts by the mother, and actually reacts to them. If the Lord Jesus who is the Creator Word of God by whom each one of us has come into being, and is indeed the source of information governing the conception and formation of each of us in the womb of our mother, then we cannot but conclude that to kill the child in the womb is a *sin against the Lord Jesus himself*.

So, from the moment of conception every human being is infinitely precious to the Lord Jesus, and is the concern of his redeeming love. Civilised countries enact laws protecting animals from the infliction of pain. Surely they ought to enact laws protecting the fetus from pain, even if in law the fetus does not have the status of personal being. But as Christians our regard for the unborn and born alike must surely be governed by our commitment to Jesus Christ, the incarnate Creator and Lord of every human being, who was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary and born to be the brother and Redeemer of humankind.

### **The Redeemer's Tears**

*"And when Jesus drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But they are hid from your eyes."* Luke 19:41,42.

Sitting on the Mount of Olives, Jesus looked over the valley to see Jerusalem and wept over its coming desolation and the slaughter of its inhabitants, men, women and children, by the Roman army. It was, we know from historians, a fearful slaughter in which Jesus'

fellow Jews were mercilessly butchered, and the Holy City was set on fire and utterly destroyed. That event belongs to the very heart of the Gospel of salvation and peace, the Lord God himself weeping over Jerusalem, shedding tears over his loved ones with whom he had become united in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and of whom he was born to save his people from their sins, God with us become one with us and one of us, the Savior of the world. Let us not forget that he who shed tears of compassion, out of the same fountain of love and mercy, shed blood too. The calamity that overtook Jerusalem was far greater in Jesus' eyes than it can be in ours, but his compassion for all those he came to save, and for whom he died, was and is infinite. Jesus was none other than God himself, God incarnate among us and one with us who shed those tears over Jerusalem, and the people of Jerusalem, the believing and the unbelieving alike. "Daughters of Jerusalem," Jesus said to those who bewailed and lamented him on his way to the Cross, "do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children" (Lk 23:28).

The destruction of Jerusalem and its people was a veritable *holocaust*. Those tears, the tears of the Redeemer, were the very tears of God himself. And they have flowed and flowed again over the fearful *holocaust* of millions and millions of Jews in our own time. But what of the abortions of unborn children that have been taking place and continue to take place throughout the world, even in "Christian" countries? Is that not the most incredible *holocaust* being perpetrated, even now, in countries where people have heard and believe the Gospel, and where millions and millions of people, as in the United States of America and in the countries of Europe, not to speak of Asia and Africa, profess to follow the Lord Jesus? Can we not allow the tears that continue to flow from the compassionate pleading eyes of the Lord Jesus, the *Redeemer's tears*, quench the flames of *holocaust*! Let us listen and listen to him: "Daughters of Jerusalem," here and everywhere, "do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children."

## **Stillbirth**

**By Leah Koncelik Lebec**

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I woke up feeling not too great. The weight of the baby pulled at my back and sides. In the past couple of weeks it had been getting harder to turn over in bed. I wasn't that big yet, but all the weight was so concentrated and unbalanced. I lay there, feeling woozy. What was going on? Aches and pains had settled everywhere during the

night. My calves ached, my back ached, my neck ached. My head was heavy.

I got up. The bathroom was warm and steamy, and Alain was shaving. I leaned against the doorjamb. "I don't feel so good," I mumbled.

“What’s wrong?”  
“I don’t know. Maybe I’m coming down with something.”  
“You’d better take it easy today.”  
“Yes.”

I decided to take a shower anyway. The water streamed over my rounded body. Pregnancy gave me a whole new self: my hair had doubled its volume, my nails grew faster than I could trim them. Everything was pumped up and primed with new life, blossoming. Now, however, the body was heavy, achy, woozy.

I cupped my hands around my smooth, full middle.  
“What’s going on, little one?”

“What did you say?” said Alain, putting away his alter-shave lotion in the medicine chest.  
“I was talking to the baby. He isn’t mov . . .”

What? What was I saying? Shake off that thought. I patted my hands briskly on top of my tummy. “Come on. Come on. Wake up!” They sleep and they wake, just like we do. They wake when we sleep and jump and stretch and turn. Then they sleep a lot when we move around. He was only sleeping.

I came out of the shower, wrapped myself in a towel. Alain was looking at me, frowning. “Are you all right?”  
“I’m sick. I’ll go back to bed for a few hours.”  
“Call me if you need me. And call the doctor.”

I lay there, feeling worse as the hours went by. By one o’clock, I realized I had a fever. I took my temperature. A hundred and two degrees. I called the doctor. “Probably just the flu,” she said. “There’s flu going around. Drink fluids, stay in bed. Take care of yourself.” The doctor’s name was Shelley. My age, or maybe younger. Very casual, very laid back. All her patients called her by her first name.

At three o’clock, I started shaking. Chills and fever. Time to call the doctor again. “Shelley’s not here. But we paged her at the hospital and she says to stop by the office. Someone here will check you out.” The office was a block away. I put on a dress, sleeveless, flowered. It was August 24, warm and sunny.

A nurse snapped commands at me. “Get on the table. Lie down. You don’t have a fever. You’re not sick.” Was she crazy? Gone were the chummy conversations of the regular staff, of Shelley. Instead we had some female commandant, barking orders and flexing her authority. “The baby’s not moving,” I blurted out.

“Yes it is,” she replied. Who was this woman? Where had they found her? I was passive, conciliatory. “Well, I thought he wasn’t moving. And I have had a fever. It comes in waves, then I get chilled.”

“The baby’s fine. Get up. You can go.”

These are the words that would burn in the mind. These are the seeds of rage. There were to be many more before he died, and was born.

The long afternoon wore on. From the bed, I move to the living room couch. I pull a blanket over me, push it off. Fever mounts, sweat soaks the couch. Every muscle seems to be curling in on itself, contracting around the sickness. The body is fighting hard. The little man inside is fighting even harder, but I don’t know that. That ignorance would pound me with grief and guilt, much later. What could anyone have done? Who knows? But the guilt I would later feel had little basis in logic: the heart has its reasons, for guilt as for love as for rage. I kept no loving vigil, I did nothing to stave off death.

Third call to the doctor. “This flu,” she says, “everybody has it. Just everybody. Did you take some Tylenol? Remember, Tylenol only, no aspirin.” I go back to bed. Now it’s seven o’clock. More chills and shaking. I get up to go to the bathroom. I have to hold onto the walls as I move. Suddenly, there is blood.

I stumble out of the bathroom just as Alain is walking in the apartment door.  
“I’m bleeding.”

He reacts with great urgency, which frightens me even more. When I see Alain’s set face and hear his taut voice, I start to panic a little. He calls the doctor, then puts me on the phone with Shelley.

“Well, I think you’d better come down to the hospital. I’ll take a look at you. I’m here.”

On the elevator up to the maternity floor, I can hardly stand. I lean against the elevator wall and feel the sweat course down my face. It seems that each burning wave of fever leaves me more drained and shaking than the last. I disrobe, put on their little flowered smock with the silly ties in the back, and give them a urine sample in the bathroom next to the treatment room. More blood. “I’m bleeding,” I say to the nurse. It seems very important to sound calm and controlled, so I keep my voice steady and informative. There is a tremendous pull to be a good and intelligent patient, and not to give anyone any trouble.

Now contractions are starting. Shelley appears, examines me, and announces that there is significant bleeding from the uterus. The baby’s heart is monitored, contractions are monitored, my blood pressure is monitored every fifteen minutes. I am in labor. The baby’s heart is beating very fast. I am twenty-eight weeks pregnant, and I am in active labor. No one has the slightest idea what is going on.

Shelley decides to give some medication to stop labor, and, finally, an antibiotic. She gives the nurse instructions, then leaves for the night. The monitors are removed. Alain offers to stay, but I tell him to go. The night nurse comes to give me a shot. Aftershocks of pain

continue to pulse through me. I cry out involuntarily. “I haven’t even given you the second one yet,” she says, and there is unmistakable fatigue and disdain in her voice.

She leaves. Everything is hurting, everything is dark. Machines are blinking. From another time and space come faint noises of cars, taxis, buses. People are out there, moving around the city. I am so far from them, from everyone. I don’t know what’s going on in this room, in my body, and no one else does either. I am afraid. A cry rises up in my throat, something like a sob, but I control it. It seems important to stifle that sob.

And then he died, sometime during the quiet predawn hours. No one wept as he died. No one knew the precise moment when his heart renounced the struggle, and he gave up his spirit.

It is dawn. I lie there, in the little white room with the cabinets and machines, waiting for someone to appear. The weight of the baby is heavy on my back. My hands are held lightly around my womb. I notice that I have no fever. The morning nurse comes in, cheerful and friendly. She picks up the stethoscope and starts to search for the baby’s heartbeat. The room is silent.

“Where exactly were they picking up the heartbeat last night?” she asks.

“I don’t know. Down on the left side, I think.”

“Hmmm . . . just a sec. Shelley’s in the hall, I’ll be right back.”

Shelley and the nurse come in. Shelley is holding the Doppler ultrasound monitor—high-tech stuff that can pick up the heartbeat of an eight-week-old fetus. She moves the monitor over my belly, slowly, methodically. Up, down, across; up, down, across. No one speaks. She repeats the gestures, over and over again. I glance fleetingly at the nurse. Her face is lowered. Her eyes are fixed on the floor.

“Leah . . . these monitors . . . they’re very sensitive—extremely sensitive. We don’t . . . we’re not picking up any heart sounds.”

Alain walks into the room. He takes one look. “What is it?”

“The baby’s heart has stopped.” I say that very calmly, because I am calm. Nothing is real. There was a heartbeat, now there is none. There were some sounds in the universe, but now those sounds are still.

Alain leans over to hold me. The doctor is saying some things—not much more information—evidence of some infection, somewhere—she is sorry—I should go home and await the birth.

There is some kind of play going on, and nobody had given me the lines to learn. I don’t know what I am supposed to say or do. I am very removed, and for some

reason, I still keep clinging to my insane desire to please everyone, to be polite, good, and cooperative. Okay. Yes. We’ll go home and await the birth. I guess I’ll call when contractions start again. Is that all right? Is that what I should do? What if they start in the middle of the night? Oh, sorry, silly question, I’ll call whenever they start. Yes, definitely, I will finish out these antibiotics: one three times a day for two more days. (Two days? said a doctor later. Two days? Infection strong enough to kill and you’re given antibiotics for two days? And then he stopped talking, abruptly.)

On that first day home, Alain and I move through our life carefully, delicately. We don’t know what to do or what to think. We don’t even know what to say to people. “The baby died, we’re waiting for him to be born”? The belly has become an embarrassment, something shockingly wrong. We don’t want people to see us. We go to get the antibiotics, then we go home. I lie on the bed and rest. In the afternoon, I get up and write in my diary, something about how the baby has died, and some sentences of farewell and resignation. They feel completely meaningless. I am not feeling a thing.

It is night. We go to bed. Alain used to kiss the baby goodnight. He used to lean over and lay his head on my middle, his arms cradling me. “Good night, baby,” he would say. “Sleep tight. Don’t kick your mama too hard tonight”—and then we’d laugh because, sure enough the baby would start jumping and thrashing around at the sound of his voice.

That first night, we went to bed, and neither one of us knew what to do. There was the lump that used to be “the baby,” but it wasn’t the baby anymore. We didn’t have the words to talk about it. But as I lay back against the pillow, and turned quietly away from him, my heart started beating fast. There was something looming on the edges of my consciousness, but I didn’t want it to come any closer.

Suddenly a whisper rose unbidden from my heart “Good night, baby.” I wanted silence. Stonily, I turned to fitful, fearful sleep. But the whisper rose again, even as my mind tried to crush the words: “Good night, little one.” And then, with a thrill of fear: “Farewell, beloved.”

The next day, we went to a church. We were vaguely wondering what we should do when the baby was born. Should we bury it? Should we baptize it? We talked to a priest. We didn’t know him and he didn’t know us. We were not rooted in any religious community then. We stumbled into his church, and demanded that he say the right words to us at a time when neither he nor we could know how heavily these decisions would weigh.

“Don’t think of it as anything but an operation,” he said. “Don’t bury it or baptize it. It will only increase the pain.” He’s right, I thought, even as a more cynical thought nudged its way in: an “operation”? What does this guy

know about childbirth? But Alain and I decided to agree with him. We didn't really care one way or another about burial or ritual. The fetus was dead. The sooner its body was taken care of the better.

Labor started again that evening. All night long, the long birth pangs continued. I thought of nothing but surviving the physical pain. No drugs, no anesthesia, no epidural, no cute breathing exercises—none of us was focusing on this as a “normal” birth. I think we were all concentrating on one thing only: get it over with, get the fetus out of there, and move on.

Finally, he was born. “Push,” said Shelley one last time, and he was out. Silence. She cut and clamped the cord. She wrapped him in a towel, wiped the blood off his face, and closed his eyes.

“Do you want to hold him?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. I was exhausted.

She placed him in my arms. Alain stood beside me, next to the narrow bed. I took the baby into the crook of my elbow, and felt the weight of his body against me.

I raised one hand, and cupped it around his tiny head. There was a kind of downy hair on his head. I touched the swirling soft pattern with the tips of my fingers. I caressed his head, then his cheek. I stared into a perfect face.

His eyes were closed. I touched the lids, then bent to kiss them: first one, then the other. He looked asleep. There was a dimple in his chin; the little mouth was shaped like his father's. A rosebud mouth, so still and quiet.

No cry, no sound, my son?

I ran my hand down from his shoulder to his hand. I picked up that hand, and stared at the fingers. They were feather-light. Each had a tiny, pink, translucent nail. The little hand curled softly around my finger. I had never known such vulnerability, such fragility. I am holding your hand, little one. You are so small, and I am here. I am your mother. I am a mother. To you. You are my son.

I cradled his head closer, closer My hand cupped his face. He was silent, still. His weight was in my arms. The weight of his body, his face, his hand, his fingers—these stay with me, forever.

I looked up. Alain looked stricken. “I can't hold him,” I said, flatly. I meant: I will not hold him in this life. He is gone from me. I will not be able to hold my baby.

Shelley thought I meant “I can't bear to hold him,” and immediately came over and took him out of my arms. She wrapped the towel around him more firmly. She wrapped it all the way around him, and covered his face. She laid him on top of a cart, covered with shiny instruments. She turned to the nurse.

“Take this to Pathology. Tell them to send me a report.”

The nurse complied. She wheeled the cart out of the room. And that was our farewell.

The day wore on. My heart went into a fluttering arrhythmia, clocked at two hundred beats a minute. Monitors, machines, cardiologists, ceaseless activity, everyone bent now on finding out “what was going on.”

Nothing was going on. I had a minor heart condition which chose that moment to show up and deflect attention over to my heart, instead of to what had just happened to “the fetus.” Nevertheless, Shelley and all the hospital personnel treated the tachycardia as though it were a full-fledged coronary, and we went through the rest of the day never once mentioning the stillbirth.

Finally, it is night. My heart has calmed down. I have been placed in a room on another floor, someone having kindly understood that the maternity wing was probably inappropriate at this time. Alain, exhausted, has gone home again, to an empty apartment and his own thoughts. My mother, on vacation in Vermont, has finally gotten through to me. She is crying. I say some things to comfort her, then hang up, turn out the light, and turn to sleep.

It is dark. There are no machines, no doctors, no nurses, no one to be polite to, no heart problem to talk about and explain, no husband to hover worriedly over my bed, no tests, no monitors.

There is no baby.

There, in the dark, it hits me. The grief is a physical thing. It comes in waves—wave after wave, shocking my spirit, shattering my heart. I curl my body around its emptiness. Its center is gone. Its womb is empty. My arms are empty.

But you were here! I held you! Where have you gone, beloved? Where are you, my little son? There is no one in the room with me, but even so, I try to muffle the wrenching sobs. His vulnerability, his fragility, his weight are more than I can bear. I feel him in my arms, but he is not here. My son. I am a mother, but my child is gone. Where are you? He is not here, but I cannot let him go. Who is holding that hand? On what breast are you cradled tonight? Are you afraid, wherever you are? Are you crying? Is someone there to hold you? Please God, hold him, rock him, cradle him, soothe him, whisper to him, caress him. Love him for me, please God.

The storm passes, but I am changed forever. It sufficed to hold him, to look into his face, and he entered my heart forever. I am a mother, and my son has died. Where there was no knowledge of him before, now there is a river, coursing through my mind and heart, bearing the memory and the loss of him forever.



For the first few months, the river is a torrent, crashing through my life, shattering friendships, straining family ties, reconfiguring my marriage, leaving devastation everywhere. People say the most painful things, and I have no words to make them understand. “You’ll have another.” “It was probably for the best.” All these statements seem to spring from a similar source: the speaker’s desire to minimize the trauma—for me, he thinks, not understanding that he is also minimizing it for himself. He cannot see what there is to grieve about. He cannot imagine “the baby,” and therefore there is nothing to mourn. What’s more, he finds reasons why the stillbirth was a “good thing.”

This is not malevolent behavior. People genuinely think they are helping when they tell me that “You’ll have plenty more.” But the words wound, and they are relentless. “All better now?” chirps a friend ten days after the birth. “How’s your thesis progressing?” asks another, avoiding the subject altogether.

But if friends and casual acquaintances seem to lack understanding, the presumptions of the wider culture batter the heart of any woman who has ever mourned a pre-term child. A mother who mourns a pregnancy loss learns to carry her grief silently, as if ashamed of her sorrow. Who cares if a child dies before it is born? Aren’t there too many children in the world already? And who says she lost a real baby anyway? In reading through some insurance papers after the birth of our son, I stopped at one sentence, a description of how the pregnancy had ended. “Fetal Wastage” was the term.

We named our son Damien. We understood, too late, how healing and important are the rituals of death. We tried to find his body, to have him baptized and buried, but, true to the monumental mishandling they had displayed from the beginning, Shelley and the hospital staff had lost the baby’s body and had no records of where he had been taken. “Where are you?” became both a literal and figurative cry. My dreams were dominated for months by desperate searches, through darkness, through strange lands, with empty arms stretched out in front of stumbling feet.

Of course time heals, and grief gives way to peace. Slowly, I allowed myself to let him go, as I drew comfort and strength from art and song and prayer, those tentative human recreations of the sacred. I had a tape of the soprano Janet Baker. Her voice wove a gentle web of love around my child—the tremulous, reverent “Ave Maria” allowed another mother’s arms to take him up and hold him; the lullaby cadence of “Close Thine Eyes” permitted both censored grief and thwarted love to simply be, unhindered and unjudged:

*Close thine eyes  
And sleep secure  
Thy soul is safe  
Thy body ‘s sure*

*He that guards thee  
He that keeps .  
Never slumbers, never sleeps  
Then close thine eyes  
And sleep secure.*

Only through such rites and symbols could I begin to give him over into the arms of his Maker. Slowly, I allowed myself to turn back to this life, this time, this valley.

The river is calm now, its torrents still and peaceful. There are seeds to sow, harvests to reap, and work to do before our own nightfall. Gabriel, Christina, and Xavier have come to bless us. Their upturned faces and sweet eyes ground us, center us, and fill us with purpose. But Damien changed the landscape of my hopes and my dreams and my thoughts. My children speak of him naturally and happily, without the embarrassment or fear that so many adults feel in hearing his name. They expect to see him one day, “on that mountain,” where every tear is washed away. He is not here, yet he is with us. I bear him forever, my firstborn son, and my children speak his name.

“Stillbirth.” There is such paradox in the word, such death. The first syllable cancels out the second. All that newness, that unfurling life, is canceled out already, from the beginning. All that sweet force, gathering, gathering, month after month, now silent, still.

And yet, triumphing over that tragic paradox, I have found an astonishing, infinitely more paradoxical joy, embedded even in that memory of my first child, unmoving in my arms.

What possible joy? The realization, for me, of how strongly God loves us. Yes, loves us, all six billion—whatever—of us, teeming over the earth. I have come to understand the love for Damien that pierced my heart as a dim reflection of God’s love for us. Such love is instantaneous, it is absolute, it has no care for how many of us there are or what we have accomplished. It has no care for how long we have been alive. Young or old, sick or well, we are lovely in His sight, worthy to His heart. The love that overwhelmed me, even for a seven-month-old stillborn baby, also deepened my understanding, comforted me, and in the end, held up for me a mirror of the divine. Our capacity to grasp the humanity, the luminous beauty, of every child who comes into being is our capacity to love as God loves—with a strength that is primal, unreasonable, and unshakable.

God loves us as a mother loves her child—because we are there, because we are His, because we are our selves: irreplaceable, forever unique, never, ever to be forgotten. “The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name” (Isaiah 49:1).

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# *Nullus Diabolus—Nullus Redemptor:* Apocalyptic Perspectives on the Cosmic Struggle for Life Against Death

By Carl E. Braaten

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“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 2:7). To the church in Ephesus, the message was: “[Y]ou have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first” (Revelation 2:4-5). To the church in Sardis the message was: “I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead. Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God” (Revelation 3:1-2). To the church at Laodicea the message was: “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (Revelation 3:15-17).

And what is the Spirit now saying to the churches of America? Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches of today. Is not this why we come together in conferences like this one? Are we not here to open our ears and listen to what the Spirit is saying to our churches?

Here, we have heard a lot already, a lot from persons whose wisdom is seasoned by long experience in the struggles for life within a “culture of death.” I cannot add much to what they have said.

But as a theologian, and occasionally as a preacher, I have often pondered, “Why, just why, are we so hard of hearing? Why is it so difficult for us to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches?” Why can we not see what is happening to a civilization and to a culture that once so proudly called itself Christian?

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## **The Recovery of a Certain Imagination**

Could it be that we have lost the ability to discern the spiritual dimensions of the cultural warfare in which we are engaged? I believe it is so. To put it another way, we have largely lost the apocalyptic imagination to understand the language of the Spirit—to fix our “minds on the things that are above” (Colossians 3:2).

The apostle Paul, who called it “discerning the spirits,” realized that “we are not contending against [mere] flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Without spiritual discernment, we cannot comprehend the greatness and the hiddenness of the cosmic struggle being fought out on planet earth. And though we say we are Christians, and though we believe in Christ, without the apocalyptic worldview and cosmic framework, we lose sight of Christ’s purposes in this world. “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). That is an example of apocalyptic utterance, and we have lost the ability to get it.

We all know, of course, that the term *apocalyptic* is notoriously difficult to define. Scholars routinely accuse each other of using the term without defining it. I think the reason is that apocalyptic—as both a type of literature and a view of the world (a *Weltanschauung*)—is a multifaceted thing. Therefore, it is not subject to a simple, one-line definition. Vaguely we sense that apocalyptic has something to do with eschatology, another conspicuously imprecise word. But we would all agree that eschatology includes the idea of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God from the future into the present, and the interpretation of history from the perspective of the end times. The word *apocalypse* most straightforwardly means revelation. Thus the apocalypse is the revelation of final mysteries and meanings hidden from ordinary eyes. Only those specially given eyes to see and ears to hear can grasp “the things which are above.” Those who do not like apocalyptic dismiss it as a pile of hokey, nothing but dreamlike

poppycock that is completely separated from the events of history and the realities of human experience.

When Jesus said, “my kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36, KJV), he made a revolutionary, apocalyptic statement that has had political repercussions down through the centuries. The early Christians caught its meaning in their first and simplest confession, “Jesus is Lord.” This confession prompted Martin Niemoeller to preach in Berlin, in the face of the Nazis, that only Jesus is our Führer, and no one else—a subversive political statement that got him thrown into jail.

We need to recover apocalyptic understanding to strengthen our backbone and to stiffen our Christian resistance movement, to face up to the rapid rate of moral decline and cultural decay that our society is undergoing. While our schools are not safe, our streets are not safe, our homes look like jails, and our marriages and families are disintegrating, many churches have exchanged Word-and-Sacrament ministry for “bread and circuses.”

The apocalyptic perspective does not encourage a wishy-washy attitude on the difference between right and wrong, good and evil, truth and lies, and fact and fiction. Under the influence of apocalyptic, we would put back into our speech and outlook concepts like total change, the demonic, signs of the times, conversion, absolute and unconditional love to God and neighbor, the reversal of roles, birth pangs of the future.

We must learn to go back and forth between the inspired language, concepts, and worldview of the Bible, on the one hand, and the ordinary language of our secular world, on the other hand. We know that we possess a highly developed, secular vocabulary for speaking about crushing evils and about how to deal with threatening catastrophes of our day—racism, oppression, violence, terrorism, hunger, homelessness, nuclear annihilation, global warming, overpopulation, environmental poisoning, and others. In contrast, biblical apocalyptic speaks about Satan, demons, angels good and bad, powers, principalities, dominions, thrones, elemental spirits of the universe, and the Dragon and the Beast. Its fundamental story line is the cosmic struggle between the Lord and Creator Spirit of life and “the prince of demons,” “the ruler of this world” of death, darkness, decadence, and destructiveness.

In the worldview of the Bible, when the works of the Devil are set aside, the works of God are diminished. That is, apart from the Devil, there is no need of divine redemption, no need of Christ. *Nullus diabolus, nullus redemptor*. Without the Devil and his dominion, the biblical story becomes flattened out and one-dimensional, leaving us with “I’m O.K., you’re O.K.,” and other gooey sayings and sentiments. Without the Devil and his dominion, God the Redeemer loses much of his identity through the abolition of his opposition, his satanic antithesis.

The modern mind has tried to do away with the dualistic features of the biblical understanding of the universe. The modern mind simply assumes that angels, spirits, principalities, powers, demons, and the like do not exist. Or, if we somehow feel bound to concede their existence out of pious deference to the combined weight of Scripture and tradition, we tend to think of them as weightless entities that flit about in the air, and occasionally invade human space from the outside.

Not so in the world of apocalyptic thinking. J. Louis Martyn says: “The dicta most basic to the apocalyptic thinker are these: God created both heaven and earth. There are dramas taking place both on the heavenly stage and on the earthly stage. Yet these dramas are not really two, but rather one drama....The developments in the drama on its heavenly stage determine the developments on the earthly stage. . . . Events seen on the earthly stage are entirely enigmatic to one who sees only the earthly stage.” In other words, what is really going on is happening on two levels, and the heavenly and the earthly levels of reality are interconnected. In the biblical drama of salvation, the spiritual and material realms are entwined in the biblical drama, and the drama reaches its climax in the story of Jesus and his redemptive victory over sin, death, and the Devil.

Modern biblical scholarship has grudgingly conceded the role and significance of apocalypticism in early Christian theology. Grudgingly, I say, because, at the same time, modern scholarship has devised various demythologizing schemes to neutralize whatever scandalizes the modern mind. Therefore, according to modern scholarship, belief in miracles and the reality of demons (in this most demonic of centuries) are bracketed and critiqued.

Theologians have been reluctant to accept the full weight of Albert Schweitzer’s discovery of the apocalyptic structure and content of Jesus’ eschatology because that would make Jesus all the more a stranger to modern culture, which of course is just the point we should want to emphasize. Henry Cadbury long ago wrote a book entitled *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus*. All this apocalyptic stuff that does not fit our so-called scientific picture of the world is simply dismissed as so much mythological husk that can be swept away. So we cradle Jesus and his message in the categories of our favorite psychological and sociological theories, as do the scholars of the Jesus Seminar.

But it was Ernst Käsemann, New Testament theologian of Tübingen, who pronounced in the face of modern demythologizing and existentialist interpretation: “Apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology.” Käsemann realized that he was taking up one of the forbidden topics in the theology of the academic establishment. He wrote: “Primitive Christian apocalyptic is generally regarded by theological scholars as not being a suitable topic for our day.”

## Literary Illustrations

Only the recovery of the apocalyptic elements of the biblical story of salvation will mobilize the churches to meet head-on the critical issues revolving around the beginning and ending of human life and the entire span in between. Political engagement alone will not suffice, for politics is the art of compromise. And on some life-and-death matters, there is no room for negotiated settlements.

Twentieth-century literature offers some splendid examples of apocalyptic retrieval. C. S. Lewis is most true to the biblical tradition. Not only in *The Screwtape Letters* but also in *Perelandra*, the Oxford don shows that there is a war between good and evil linked to all our individual choices, which have cosmic implications. The material world we see is not the only world there is; hidden within it is a real world of ultimate truths and values that cannot be seen with ordinary eyes, or by reason alone, but only with that sixth sense of spiritual discernment, by faith alone. God and the Devil are both real; it is a materialist delusion to think they do not exist.

Another literary giant is Georges Bernanos, who was part of the Catholic Renaissance in France, along with people like Paul Claudel, Francois Mauriac, and Antoine Peguy. For Bernanos, as for Lewis, the struggle between good and evil in the individual soul is the microcosm of the cosmic contest between God and the Devil. There is a void in all of humanity, like unto nothingness, “exuding hatred of God and love of death. Deadly sin lies in associating ourselves with this nothingness, with a conscious complicity in Satan’s ruses, a lucid acceptance of his power to corrupt, and a willingness to come to terms with him.” The novels of Bernanos picture Satan as the personality at the heart of evil and Christ as the personality at the heart of good. “Without belief in Satan,” he argued, “one cannot fully believe in God. The world is riddled with evil, and deliberate blindness to that fact obscures the truth about the world and therefore the truth about God. The scale of evil in the world far transcends what humanity could cause itself, and all efforts to improve the world without understanding this transcendence are doomed to failure.”

## The Apocalyptic Jesus

The source of the literary imagination of C. S. Lewis and Georges Bernanos is the world of biblical apocalypticism. It all began with the Jews during the period between the Testaments. There we find that the main focus is on the future, on what God will do to redeem Israel through the coming of the Messiah. In the ministry and message of Jesus, the focus on the future is curved back upon the present, upon Jesus himself. Jesus not only preaches a future messianic kingdom to come; rather, in him, the kingdom has already arrived. He is the *autobasileia*—the messianic kingdom itself. Jesus does not merely point to the future in the present; instead, he makes present the reality of God’s future in a concentrated, personal way. The attitude that a person now takes to Jesus determines

his own personal meaning and destiny—salvation, if you please.

This motif is very important to those of us caught up in a struggle in which we seemingly have been losing ground. We are to struggle with all our might and man for the coming of the kingdom of life over the reign of death, but we cannot make it come. The conditions of its coming are not subject to our power or efforts. We are not asked to save the world; only God can do that. Meanwhile, the only way to live as Christian disciples is to resist death and the Devil in whatever earthly forms they appear. And we can do so with hope and confidence because, paradoxically, we can already celebrate the victory of God over the Enemy—the unholy trinity of sin, death, and the Devil. In Christ the decisive battle has already been won. Although we are called to continue the struggle for the dignity of life against the defilement of death, the outcome is no longer in doubt. We shall overcome! We are more than conquerors! This is the ground on which we stand, in light of the apocalyptic vision of the triumph of God over evil in this world.

The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (August 29, 1998) featured a story about the letters W.W.J.D.—“What Would Jesus Do?”—the latest, multimillion-dollar bonanza for companies marketing bracelets, T-Shirts, pens, key chains, books, calendars, stuffed animals, and tote bags, all of which sells not only in Christian boutiques but in mainstream stores like K-Mart. “What would Jesus do?” Sounds like the right question. Right? Wrong! It is the wrong question because it lets us off the hook; it puts us in charge of the answer. The right question is “What did Jesus do?” or “What will Jesus do?” And how does W.W.J.D. tell us who he is?

Christians have always looked to the real Jesus—the living Christ—of the Gospels in search of a word, a model, a promise, or a sign, to challenge us, to direct us, to clue us in as to where to stand, when to march, how to act. After all the revolutions in recorded history have come and gone, there remains the revolutionary, recorded message and ministry of Jesus that outlasts and transcends them all.

Jesus of Nazareth read his first manifesto in the synagogue, taken from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to preach  
good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the  
captives and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed. . . . (Lk 4:18)

He came to the defense of the defenseless. He took sides in the struggle of life for the poorest of the poor, forgotten people locked up in jails, the blind, all the victims of oppression. It does not stretch the imagination too much to include the most helpless of all—abused children and

the millions of unborn little ones, treated like garbage often for the sake of personal convenience.

Jesus never talked about gradual measures, minor improvements, piecemeal changes, or just a little bit of progress. He had an all-or-nothing way of speaking. He was not for reform but repentance. He was not for accommodation but conversion. He did not talk about the happy medium, the middle way. It was the mark of his apocalyptic mind-set to speak in absolutes, in total terms, and in complete transvaluations (which involve a reversal of signs so that plus becomes minus and minus becomes plus). No wonder the apocalyptic Jesus has become a stranger to our times.

The call of the kingdom is not to become a little better, but to turn away radically from the old ways to a new life. In this new life there are deeds to be done. Discipleship calls for discipline, moral clarity, and behavioral consistency. When Jesus brings the rule of God into our lives, he brings the love of God first of all, forgiveness for the wretched sinners we are. But he was never heard preaching an unconditional love and acceptance that leaves people in their sins; that kind of popular, mushy sentimentality blinds us to the sins marked out for condemnation by the commandments of God.

When the kingdom of God, the rule of God's love, claims a person, one must be prepared to sacrifice whatever gets in the way of our love and loyalty to God. It may be parents, possessions, profession, or patriotism. Extreme measures are called for; an offending eye must be plucked out, and an evil-doing hand cut off, so to speak. One must be prepared to be despised, ridiculed, and ostracized by old friends and esteemed colleagues. A clean-cut choice has to be made. God and mammon cannot both be served; either you carry the cross of the kingdom or you seek the security of the system. I know some young, aspiring scholars afraid to speak or write on certain, forbidden topics, or even to be closely associated with those who do, lest they should jeopardize their chances of climbing the academic ladder. "[W]hoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33). This unconditional surrender of all your heart, soul, mind, and body to the rule of God's love means this: giving your whole life away is the only way really to get a life.

And who knows what can happen when such an apocalyptic reversal of ordinary religion and everyday morality takes place. Who knows what new dreams, new thrusts, and new directions may lead to a more just, wholesome, and peaceful society. This gets down to the nitty-gritty of social morality, economic systems, political structures, and juridical procedures. What the Bible calls "principalities and powers," from whose systems of domination Christ has set us free, are the driving determinants behind many of the cultural institutions of our day. These "spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" are not floating in the air beyond distant clouds; they are rather the spiritual heart and soul of

earthly institutions that conspire against life and the Giver of life. Remember: these are the same public institutions that joined forces to pronounce the death penalty and execute the Lord of life on a criminal's cross.

Jesus died a public death in a public place at the hands of public forces. Organized religion put Jesus to death. The economy got involved—graft, greed, and bribery in the hands of the moneychangers. Blood money put Jesus to death. The judicial process swung into action—a kangaroo court, a flunky judge, false witnesses, concocted charges. A corrupt juridical system put Jesus to death. Chanting idiot slogans to heat up the blood in their veins, the mob fell in line with the ruling class. The masses had been programmed to thrive on violence, to sink into sadism; so they switched from the hosanna chants of one weekend to the cries, "Crucify him," on the next. The polls and public opinion, voices from the conservative cliques, the radical reformers, and the middle-class all had a hand in putting Jesus to death. And then there was the military. Soldiers were there to carry out the will of the ruling oligarchy. They stripped him, beat him, and pressed thorns into his scalp. They only did what they were ordered to do, trained as they were to do the bidding of Rome. And so they drove the spikes through his hands and feet. They gambled for his clothes. And Jesus was dead, literally dead.

All of that you could see with your eyes, if you had been there. It was a public affair. But the New Testament looks into the spiritual depths of the cross. It was not just a bad mix-up at city hall, resulting in an unfortunate death of an innocent man. "On that cross he [God] discarded the cosmic powers and authorities like a garment; he made a public spectacle of them and led them as captives in his triumphal procession" (Colossians 2:15, NEB). Luther had a similar knack of seeing what lies beneath the surface plane—what I have called apocalyptic imagination. The cross was a trap God set for the Devil. "The Devil saw Jesus as his prize, snapped at the bait, and was pulled out of the water for all to see." Sin, death, and the Devil were the real but hidden powers at play in the passion of our Lord. That is why the victory of the cross is so great and unique; it deals with the profoundest dimensions of human bondage. Jesus "gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father" (Galatians 1:4). Jesus "himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). "[W]e impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God," Paul writes, "which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Corinthians 2:7-8). It took a good dose of spiritual discernment, or apocalyptic imagination, for Paul to view Christ's death as salvation from the wrath of God (Romans 5:9), or to see Christ as a paschal lamb sacrificed on our behalf.

So what is the Spirit of God saying to the churches of our nation? "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of

the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?" We are talking about the meaning of baptism, the time when we renounced the Devil and all his works and ways. Paul is keen to associate our freedom with baptism, our living through dying with Christ. "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life...We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin" (Romans 6:4 and 6). Baptism is our entrance into a countercultural community that, instead of cozying up to the powers that be, has the courage to tangle with the demons of our day, to engage the structures of destruction, the rulers and powers in high places. Those of us in the countercultural community called the Church know that these rulers and powers even have the votes and the vetoes on their side, with power to decide the fate of unborn humans whose little bodies, with divinely endowed souls, can be denied a future of earthly life in the community of the beloved.

The Seer of the Apocalypse writes: "If anyone has an ear, let him hear: If any one is to be taken captive, / to captivity he goes; / if any one slays with the sword, / with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints" (Revelation 13:10). We must not, for the sake of the kingdom of God, fight violence with violence. Jesus spoke in negatives as though to warn us against trying to bring in the kingdom in worldly ways. He spoke as though he did not expect many of us would have the guts to do it his way—the way of suffering and the cross. Perhaps he was expecting, at most, a tiny cadre of followers, of faithful disciples. So he said in effect: "My little band of followers must be different." Therefore, you must not get angry or swear; you must not be a hypocrite; you must not see the splinter in your brother's eye; do not brag about your good deeds; and do not put a lot of money in the bank. Do not worry about tomorrow; it takes the joy and humor out of today. Do not be greedy and full of spite. If you lose, do not get mad at the guy who beats you. Say, "Nice going, good shot," not out of pretense and good manners, but from the heart. When you pray, do not show off, using nice religious words and the meaningless repetition of ritualistic phrases.

Who cares to join the movement headed up by Jesus? He does not make it easy for us. Do not just love your family and friends; love your enemies. It is easy to pray for those who love you back. Try praying for those you oppose, whose deeds you condemn, the people on the other side. And do not seek revenge, but get the hate out of your heart. If someone enjoys hitting you on the cheek or below the belt, let him do it again and again. Give, and expect nothing in return.

### **The Good News of the Apocalypse**

Who can handle all of that? The apocalyptic word and model that came to expression in Jesus is paradoxically

the good news. Yet, it is the good news for us living in precarious times. We are living in apocalyptic times, and yet we are trying to get along without an apocalyptic faith and theology. We are trying to use a theology of the establishment, written by academics in comfortable, temperature-controlled rooms and written for establishment types who grapple at a distance with the life-and-death issues. We academics have heard about these issues through television, newspapers, histories, and studies, but are we prepared to deal with the actions of the Beast and the Dragon of the Apocalypse entwined with them? Remember, we are not fighting against flesh and blood. It is not merely a case of bad politicians who could be replaced by good politicians. We are dealing with structures of world-wide destruction of cosmic proportions, with principalities and powers, with the Dragon and the Beast.

The Apocalypse of John was written at a time when Christians were in grave danger. Rome was beginning to enforce the cult of emperor worship. Some in the church were advocating a policy of compromise. John had a vision and then wrote it down to encourage the faithful to stand fast, to resist the demands of emperor worship, even unto death. Again and again in our century, at times of severe peril and persecution, this book has come back into play. It is amazing to remember that at one time the Book of Revelation barely made it into the canon of Scripture, and would have been thrown out if some theologians had had their way.

Ernst Käsemann—and I come back to him from time to time—specified: "For the first time in remembered history, the tide is running against us; and for the first time since the early days of Christianity, it is possible seriously to imagine that the vision of the Book of Revelation is literally being fulfilled: that the Antichrist is enthroned visibly and universally on the graves of the saints and only in the desert is there room for the people of God."

There are many—perhaps some hardheaded thinkers here—who would question the wisdom of reviving the polarizing, antagonistic rhetoric of apocalyptic: God and Satan, angels and demons, good and evil, heaven and hell, life and death, cross and resurrection. These are not the sorts of things we learn about in the core curriculum of our most highly rated colleges, universities, and seminaries. Moreover, the symbols of the apocalypse have often been made into speculative playthings of eschatological sharpshooters, who gaze into the remote future and concoct unreal agendas of "last things." The point is rather to reappropriate language and images that match the realities of our present.

Apocalyptic symbols help us to see things as they really are, to see the many rivals at war. There is no Christ alone; his identity is established in relation to the Antichrist. There is no Gospel as such; it can be known best in contrast to the law. The sense of the holy becomes

sharp in relation to what is profane. In the Gospels it is the demon-possessed who are able to recognize the Christ. The identity and meaning of Christ go hand in hand with the works of the Antichrist. If Christ means freedom and liberation, then the Antichrist means domination, oppression, and slavery. The work of Christ exists in direct opposition to the principalities and powers, the world rulers of this present darkness, and the spiritual hosts of wickedness (Ephesians 6:12).

Reasonable people are invoking apocalyptic categories to frame the culture wars being waged in the media, in education, in religion, in politics, and in law. Peter Kreeft calls for an “ecumenical jihad” to stand up against the culture wars that are fast eroding the fundamentals of religion, morality, and law on which society is based. When abortion and homosexual behavior become commonplace in the society and in the churches, and merely matters of personal choice and lifestyle preference, we find ourselves up to our noses in the sludge of social decay and decadence. It boggles the mind. Politicians, or the majority of them, vote for such things in the name of tolerance and enlightenment. Educators *en masse* endorse them. The media celebrate them. Meanwhile, churches are divided by them. And theologians, or at least many of the best of them, have long since slid down the slippery slope of relativism and pluralism. We are in for a very long haul.

The Apocalypse of John pictures imperial Rome in terms of the Dragon and the Beast. Can that picture be superimposed on the American Empire? Are we now dealing with the Dragon and the Beast? I do not know, but if the shoe fits, we should at least wear it for a while. So let us listen to how the Apocalypse depicts the Dragon and the Beast.

The Dragon has given colossal power to the Beast, and the Beast sits on the throne and exercises great authority. People fear, love, and trust the Beast’s authority above all things. John was worried that even Christians are willing to bend their knees. They say the authority is to be trusted because the authority knows best. They say there is no one like the Beast. It is the proudest power, the greatest nation, in the history of the world. It cannot be wrong. It cannot be defeated. Honor and pride belong to the Beast. Who can stand up against it? The mouth of the Beast utters haughty and blasphemous words. The Beast is blaspheming the name of God, because it makes war on the saints. The Beast is a world imperialist. It exercises authority over every tribe, people, tongue, and nation. It dominates the world’s markets. It exports instruments of violence and vice. It sneers at the ways and customs of other people. It succeeds in making its language the *lingua franca* of all nations and continents. And it forces all the little people of the world to live off the crumbs that fall from the table, that trickle down to them from the top. John says, if you want to know what is going on, you must know about the Dragon and the Beast, and the deeper realities hidden behind the apparent causes and daily

headlines. What John found most lamentable was that Christians were confused about what was going on. Someone has said that the Church, which is supposed to be the searchlight, is more often the taillight of every new movement in the world. There were Christians, John saw, who were willing to live a hyphenated existence with the Beast. Not satisfied with an exclusively Christian identity, they were willing to compromise, to accommodate a worldly political affiliation. John feared that Christianity would become merely an adjective, in effect, offering legitimation and support to the operations of the Beast in the world. Watch out, you who have been signed with the cross, lest you too bear the mark of the Beast! Christianity becomes an adjective when Christ is not the soul and substance of the Church, the sole head of the body. Kierkegaard warned from allegedly Christian Denmark: “Little by little and now at last, Christianity has become exactly the opposite of what it is in the New Testament.” Of course, they said Kierkegaard was known to be given to occasional exaggerations.

## Conclusion

So what are the churches to do? How can you fight the Beast if, when you get rid of one, the Dragon will dispatch another? The first thing, John said, is to remain faithful; and the second is to remember you are in the struggle for the long haul, until the day Christ returns in all his glory. So what are we to do in the meantime? What are people of the endtime to do in the meantime? What does it mean to remain faithful?

We are followers of the Lamb that was slain. Brawls in the alleys will not do. “If anyone slays with the sword, with the sword must he be slain” (Revelation 13:10). The Lamb was slain so that we will slay no more. We are free to die on a cross, but not to place another person’s body on the rack. We know there will be violence, for it is sheer stupidity to think that the Beast will be a silent spectator of its own demise and destruction. And here is the good news of the Apocalypse. The Gospel tells us that the Dragon has received a mortal wound. We can hardly keep from laughing in the face of the Beast, because we know that the entire imperial network of powers under the authority of the Dragon has more than met its match. There is no longer any reason for gloom and despair. We can sing the songs of victory even now in the midst of the struggle. One of the verses proclaims: “[T]he devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!” (Revelation 12:12). Worship is the most potent political weapon we have, which is why John had to condemn every form of emperor worship, because it resulted in giving away what is most precious—the gift of freedom to worship God and God alone in purity and in truth. Idolatry is the greatest sin, and blasphemy its next of kin.

In the meantime, eschatologically speaking, the Church will always be a resistance movement in the world, resisting evil and the agents of death, all the wiles and ways of the Dragon and the Beast. The struggle will never

end, and will always have a specific target. But let it not be said that we are down in the mouth, for we are born anew to celebrate the victory of God in the midst of apparent setbacks. In the very midst of strife and suffering, we can always sing a hymn, say a prayer, and know that God is with us.

Those who engage in struggles for life against death, and who lack the resources of faith and worship, are often people of courage and virtue, but they cannot be trusted to hang in there for the long haul. And that is because Christian ethics does not stand on its own feet; its resource lies in the depths of the faith that reaches into the heart of God. Many partners in the struggle look for social change based on humanistic moral guidelines, but they depart when the going gets rough. They are likely to respond to political setbacks in moods of resignation and despair. They lack the eschatological perspective embedded in the liturgical celebrations of the Church. For liturgy is basically eschatology, the sacramental communication of God's future in Christ under the conditions of these troubled times. In the liturgy we are reminded that even when we lose a battle or two, we are still assured of the outcome.

Here again the Apocalypse can help us. It was Michael and his angels who fought against the Dragon. This is good news! We are not in it alone. What defeated the Dragon, "that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" (Revelation 12:9)? Not the number and power of the saints who took him on in hand-to-hand combat. Rather, "they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death" (Revelation 12:11). Satan is cast down, stripped of his power, and it is only a question of time before he will be

thrown into the lake of fire. His eternal fate is sealed; his days in time are numbered.

To see all of this requires apocalyptic imagination. Only those who have eyes to see can see what the Seer has seen in his vision. Because of this, when repression is visited upon the saints, their numbers grow. The blood of the martyrs is indeed the seed of the Church. Christians have no right to expect a better hand than the system dealt to their commander in chief, the way of suffering and the cross, which is a mark of the true and faithful Church!

Jesus, the one who was slain by the Dragon and the Beast, who has been exalted to heaven, who now sits at the right hand of the Father, holds the whole world in his hands. This is the victory that supports our faith. The rule of God has already begun. The authority of Christ is not pie in the sky bye and bye. His will is being done already, now!, on earth as it is in heaven. We may exercise the power of prayer to pray for our enemies; we have been given the gift to make peace in the throes of violence; we have the uncanny ability to love those we otherwise would hate; and we face the prospect of death in the joy of life.

With apocalyptic imagination we hold, contrary to all appearances, and therefore paradoxically, that the Lordship of Christ is already fully established. Our faith in the power of the Spirit is invincible; it cannot deceive us. What we hold in our imagination we declare already as fact on account of Christ.

"Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever"" (Revelation 11:15).

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