

ESCHATOLOGY AS INTERPERSONAL (Last Things)

Virgil Warren, PhD

Under the (inter)personal worldview, there is eschatology because the future is going somewhere intentional. Predestination guarantees the meaningfulness of history by providing destiny. The possibility of making all things new contrasts with the myth of eternal returns, the cyclical view of history. A creating God who originates by willing can bring about the truly new. The future is not limited to the possibilities of the past, nor is the future sheer eventuation; the future is foreordained by a Person who chooses destinies. There is more to tomorrow than one experience leading to the next.

The future is not produced just from inside space-time history. God breaks in to redirect where time would not otherwise go, to plant events that would not otherwise occur, to stop what would otherwise thwart his intentions. It is not just *futurum* (outgrowth from internal processes; endogenous causation); it is also *adventus* (entrance from external causes; exogenous causation).

The future is not deterministically set and precise; it is definite in that God creates a natural and providential channel within whose boundaries variability can occur as affairs move toward ever-unfolding new goals. The future is not determined, but it is definite.

The role of predictive prophecy relative to eschatology is to give hope, more than to write history ahead of time. God predicts the triumph of good over evil so his people will not faint in the face of temporary circumstances—so we will not “*grow weary with well-doing*” (Galatians 6:9). Extreme adversity might otherwise cause us to suppose that evil could thwart God’s purposes in time and eternity.

Interpersonal concerns establish the central facts about Christ’s return. It will be a personal return in history. His people will be with him, and we will be like him and see him face to face. We will meet him in the air and always be with him (1 Thessalonians 4:17). *Parousia* means “being beside.” His parousia manifests his being present with his people. His personal return is to receive us into face-to-face relationship with him.

As a result, the concern about Christ’s return centers around what rather than when, exactly how, how far off, or in what sequence with other events. Given the revelation we have so far, we may not be able to tell how that will unfold, but we do know it will. That is one reason scripture has not been precise about the time and manner of his return: it calls us keep on living by faith.

In that respect, heaven begins now; life is now. Later, we will see him as he is. Hell also begins now. Paul said of a wanton woman that she is dead while she is alive (1 Timothy 5:6).

God's operation toward evil has a format. Love and holiness represent two prominent characteristics of God. They do not work in parallel as pictured in Augustinianism plus Calvinism, where love operates in securing salvation for some and holiness operates in condemning others. Neither is holiness eclipsed by love or *vice versa*. Instead, love and holiness sequence in this order; when love is sufficiently rejected, holiness is eventually brought to bear. The love available in redemption is offered to all. The holiness present in justice issues in hell for those who refuse that love. On all hands, rejected love provides a legitimate basis for condemnation.

Interpersonalism may afford one more option for envisioning the impact of eternal destruction on sinful people. Personhood involves capacity for relationships. To destroy relationship possibilities destroys the exercise of personhood. If we are going to use sanctified imagination to think about the nature of hell, then we can think of it as operating on a model of poetic justice in which people receive what they sought in their sin. Sin is self-centered. Egocentric behavior manipulates other people; hence, it depersonalizes them so that interpersonal experience no longer exists. The result of that pattern would be eternal loneliness. Mental anguish and psychological boredom would be the kinds of things that the corporeal suffering figuratively represents, whether by fire or outer darkness. In this way, there would be eternal conscious existence, and the degree of suffering would be proportionate to the sense of guilt; the punishment would be commensurate with the crime. The punishment would be in the same category as the crime—personal fellowship withdrawn in punishment for personal fellowship rejected. It would be *“the darkness outside”* (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). The punishment would be such as could be experienced by those who do not have material existence.

So, interpersonalism touches on eschatology and the doctrine of hell. Whatever else hell may be, it most probably is a circumstance where persons cannot exercise the interpersonal capacity. It is a state of separation from God and the loss of interpersonal experience with other persons. Hell would be comparable to solitary confinement.

Destruction may not be annihilation or conditional immortality but a state in which they cannot exercise their capacities as persons. Expressing their will is removed. The rich man could not cross over the great gulf to Abraham's arms, nor could he receive Lazarus to himself. The abode of the good was personalized as being in Abraham's arms, but the rich man was in an impersonal place of suffering.

Hell has at least the nature of poetic justice insofar as it gives people what they implicitly seek in their sin. Sin has the form of self-centeredness, a kind of individualism, a kind of non-interpersonalism. Hell comes in consequence of refusing to act positively with other persons—refusal to act interpersonally, choosing to act anti-interpersonally. Hell could be some form of loneliness.

NOTE: Unclear from that reconstruction is how degrees of hell (“many stripes”) fit into the picture. Could hell allow for connection only with other lost individuals somehow arranged according to their sinfulness? Is there more to the picture than what can be inferred from the interpersonal starting point? Since we do not know what the next form of existence is like, we are not in a position to understand the positive and negative destinies that lie within it. Such matters indicate that sanctified imagination is only suggestive and provisional. It is another application of the admission that “we do not know what we will be.”

christir.org