



Millennium Fever

And The Future of This Earth: Between False Expectations And Biblical Hope

Wim Rietkerk



RANSOM FELLOWSHIP
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by Wim Rietkerk

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Introduction

Going Titanic First Class

For astronauts orbiting the earth in a few hours, the world is indeed a global village. Gazing down at their own planet, a glorious blue-white sphere floating in endless space, they have every right to be thankful for the wonder of life on this planet in all its beauty and diversity.

But what about its future? Certainly those of us who remain down here are worried—what will the future of this great planet earth be, if we continue to pollute the atmosphere, continue to cut down trees and build up life-destroying weapon systems?

A recent poll on the expectations of American young people about the future was published under the title, “Going Titanic First Class.” The title effectively expressed the general feeling that the whole earth is something like the historic ship, strong and great in appearance but headed for disaster. Its beauty, camouflaging its fragility, entices us to try to build lasting mansions here for ourselves and our children, in spite of the doom looming on the horizon.

Christian Confusion

What is the Christian’s expectation for the future? Most books on this subject deal with the future of humankind and the future of Christians in heaven. But is there also a prophetic view about the future of the earth itself?

Many orthodox Christians believe that eventually all Christians will go to heaven and the earth will perish. In 1985 at a L’Abri Conference in Australia, I was asked to preach a sermon in Sydney. I spoke to a group of

young people on the first letter to Timothy (4:1-6), where Paul says that everything God has created is good, and that nothing in this creation should be rejected. In my enthusiasm over this idea, halfway through the sermon I said, “Heaven is not our future!”

This sentence stuck in the minds of the people there, many of whom came to me afterward and asked, “Did you say that heaven is not our future? Usually we hear a different message, that faithful Christians will go to heaven. This is our future.” In our conversation, I discovered that what they had learned was a completely unbiblical view.

Consequently, I wrote a lecture entitled “Heaven is Not Our Future,” and that was the beginning of this book. The question of whether or not heaven is our future is inextricably bound to our view of the future of this world. There is a strong conviction among many Christians that the earth will end in fire. Is it biblical to expect the destruction of this world?

Christian Responsibility

It becomes clear that the biblical view of the future of the earth is not at all a type of “doomsday thinking,” seen so often in secular and pious forms. As the Protestant Reformers phrased it, we believe in Christ the Re-Creator. The focus of this book, then, is to explore what this means practically: to encourage all people to fight for the preservation of this world and against all that endangers it.

Believing in a restored world does not leave us without responsibility. In a nuclear age, where humans have the power to make the world uninhabitable, it is essential to look to the promises of the Scriptures. As Peter himself put it, we must remind ourselves “of the predictions of the

prophets and the commandments of our Lord and Savior through his apostles” (2 Peter 3:2).

This book has been developed as part of the work of L’Abri Fellowship, whose founder Francis Schaeffer said of our responsibility, “we are called to build a pilot plant” (*Pollution and the Death of Man*, page 82). How, then, are we to do it? After considering the question of the earth’s destruction in chapters 1-4, we then return in chapters 5 and 6 to the earlier question, “Is heaven our future?” In chapters, 7-9, we will look at the follow-up question Jesus was asked by his disciples, “When will all this take place?” (Mt. 24:3)

Chapter 1: Millennium Fever?

The First Millennium

Long ago, as the eve of the first millennium approached, many people had the feeling that it would be a great turning point. The first thousand years after the birth of Christ was coming to an end, and the world was preoccupied with the question: would this be the moment that he would come back? Some Christians even waited on a mountain top in Italy as the clock turned twelve, to see him coming. Others trembled, expecting the beginning of the time of tribulation before Christ’s return.

Whether joyful or depressed, the fever was real. Today, however, as we face the change from the first millennium into the second, there seems to be no such fever beyond the normal anticipation we have with any new decade or even new year. Apart from a few fringe groups, the only worry we

really have is the computer problem: what will happen if our systems cannot handle the date change and refuse their normal operation? Compared to the first millennium, it is something quite different.

A Reason to Relax

In a way, this is good. The fever at the turning point in the year 1000 led to nothing. The first day of the year 1000 was not a bit different from the last day of 999. Indeed, the whole idea of such an “era” is, to begin with, a human invention. It is very inaccurate. Most scholars take it as a fact that Jesus was born four years before the year zero, and in older times people did not start counting from zero anyway, but from one. The many different ways of counting the years were finally united by the monk Gregorius in 1657, and we still use his artificial construction today.

Furthermore, there is no obvious blueprint for the future of humankind and its dwelling place in the Bible. When certain people began to make such blueprints, based for example on the book of Revelation, they usually misinterpreted the character of the book Revelation (see chapters 8 and 9).

So there are all kinds of good reasons to say to our neighbors today as we approach the new millennium that there is no reason for millennium fever. The switch from December 31, 1999, to January 1, 2000, will be as normal as the one from today to tomorrow.

The Risk of Apathy

On the other hand, we should not be completely happy with this basically indifferent approach to the new millennium. For the most part, it is deeply tied to a sense of apathy, reflecting the postmodern mind set we

have inherited. No one phrased this better than J. F. Lyotard, who wrote that we live in a period of history when “the time of the great meta-narrative is over.” In other words, most people today feel there is no universal purpose or destiny for mankind “above” daily events.

Consequently, each attempt to create an all-inclusive view for human history or western civilization immediately falls under suspicion. Several ideologies, such as communism and fascism, have tried to shape human society according to such an all-inclusive view of history and the associated ideals. These systems, as history has shown, brought only misery. Their failure and others leaves us with the conclusion that there is no plan or ultimate goal at all.

People who have suffered from such disillusionment will, of course, look to the transition into the new millennium with indifference. As we have seen, some indifference can be healthy. There is only a small step, however, from here to irresponsibility. To say simply, “go with the flow,” is a dangerous risk. What would such a view mean for the environment, for example?

Can There be Hope?

When we think of the future of the earth, we see just how dangerous such apathy can be. In our age, the enormous increase in technology lies in tension with the finiteness of the earth’s resources. Without some kind of meta-narrative, it is very difficult to work for the preservation and development of our environment. Certainly the same is even more true as we consider the degree to which all nations must learn to work together in our global village.

So what are we to do? The post-modern atmosphere Lyotard described is certainly one we recognize. Perhaps it is time to challenge it, however. Is there really no universal goal? Is there really no destiny for mankind and no plan for the cohabitation of the peoples of the earth? Are we left behind as orphans? Before answering these questions, it is helpful first to start with the basics: what is the essential nature of our planet?

In the next chapter we will begin by looking at the world we live in. Is it the product of chance? Is there a God involved in its creation? If so, is it a goddess, Mother Earth? Or is the world something like a watch, simply set aside to run by itself after it was made? Or could it be the creation of a personal God who is still actively working in it?

Chapter 2: Four Views of the World

What is the nature of the world we live in? Before developing a view on the future of the earth or how to care for it in the present, we must first consider this basic question.

In this chapter we will examine four different answers, each of which exerts a strong influence in our current culture. In each case, we see a dramatically different view of the world, or the earth and its inhabitants: 1.) the theory of evolution, with the world as a product of chance; 2.) eastern pantheism, with the world as either a goddess or some other force of unity; 3.) deism, with the world as a complex machine made by a distant god who left it to run on its own; and 4.) biblical Christianity, with the world as the

creation of a personal God who calls it “good” and continues to be involved with it.

1. Chance and the Theory of Evolution

Much of the current secular pessimism about the future of the earth is the natural consequence of the view that the earth and human life are accidental products of sheer chance. In this view, life must end in the same way, in simply another accident, without “chance” shedding a tear over it. Such a view, which excludes anything outside of the material realm, we call a naturalistic view.

As we can see, such a view is bound to be pessimistic about the future of the earth. Remarkably, however, this pessimism can be avoided when thinking about the immediate future. For the moment we are going Titanic first class! At least in the West, we seem to act with little worry about the earth’s resources. They will all be sufficient for our own lifetimes. While it is possible to live in such a shortsighted manner, most of us would rather look farther into the future.

Interestingly, more and more people today are criticizing the claims of evolutionary theory. L. Kolakowski, for example, expresses a deep doubt in the evolutionist paradigm in his book *Religion* (Oxford: UP, 1982; pp. 64,153). It has been recognized that it requires a lot of “faith” to believe that a peacock or the human eye are all simply a chance product of matter and time. It is as incredible as believing that if you shake all the unassembled pieces of a Boeing 747 long enough in the wind, an airplane will come out of it! And what about feelings of deep despair or loving compassion? Are these also randomly formed? If so, they can only be emotional illusions without any real significance.

A Weak Basis

Even in the scientific community, the paradigm of evolutionary theory as the one explanation of the origin of our world is breaking down. Several of the parts of the chain of evolution are still unsolved. When looking at certain serious questions, such as how inorganic material could ever produce life, how basic organic life could ever grow into animals, or how an animal could ever grow human consciousness, we must recognize that even if one link of the chain is weak or absent, the whole chain breaks.

In spite of new ideas proposing our continued evolution as a species through technology, many have recognized that the weak scientific basis of evolutionary theory makes it an untenable explanation for the world as we know it. Furthermore, as we look to the future, the failure of this theory to consider seriously the real questions of life, meaning and personal dignity tells us that it cannot be the answer. Without some outside source of purpose and direction, the earth as a closed system of cause and effect will leave us without hope. It began with the Big Bang, and it will end with a Fizzle Out.

The next three views that we will consider each have such an outside source, namely a supernatural deity. What relationship would such a deity have with the world? Would God be immanent in the world, immediately present in it? Or would God be transcendent, far beyond it? Each view offers a different answer on the question of whether there is a future for our world.

2. Immanence and Eastern Pantheism

In traditional Eastern religion and philosophy, the earth was not created by a personal God as something separate. The old mythology of

the East teaches that this world is itself an extension of the gods, that it emanates from them and continues to be a part of them. The classic depiction of this is in Hindu carvings of the god Vishnu, who rests on the Serpent with a lotus growing and blooming from his navel. On the lotus is the god Brahma, symbolizing Brahmana, or the universe.

In this view, there is no real distinction between God and the world. Though in one sense there are different parts with different names, ultimately all is one. This thinking has become very influential in the New Age movement. Fritjof Capra, for example, describes this as a mystical experience in his popular book, *The Tao of Physics*:

Five years ago, I had a beautiful experience ... I was sitting by the ocean one late summer afternoon, watching the waves rolling in and feeling the rhythm of my breathing, when I knew that the sand, rocks, water and air around me were made of vibrating molecules and atoms, and that these consisted of particles which interacted with one another by creating and destroying other particles. I knew also that the earth's atmosphere was continually bombarded by showers of "cosmic rays," particles of high energy undergoing multiple collisions as they penetrated the air. All this was familiar to me from my work in high-energy physics, but until that moment I had only experienced it

through graphs, diagrams and mathematical theories. As I sat on that beach my former experiences came to life; I “saw” cascades of energy coming down from outer space, in which particles were created and destroyed in rhythmic pulses; I “saw” the atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance of energy; I felt its rhythm and I heard its sound, and at that moment I knew I was the dance of Shiva, the Lord of Dancers worshiped by the Hindus (p.11).

When creation is perceived as “emanating” from God as God’s dance, it is naturally viewed as somehow divine. This sounds initially like a very high view of creation indeed. But if the world is entirely divine, then there is a problem. All that exists as part of the world must be good, including thorns and thistles, droughts and floods, earthquakes and hurricanes. Nothing can be viewed as harmful or deserving resistance, because humans are just another part of the divine dance with no intrinsic responsibility or authority to interfere with the processes of nature.

The World as Unreality

Another problem with this deification of nature is that ultimately it is forced to view the world as unreal. If everything is divine, then all is one. If this unity is the only ultimate reality, then any diversity or individuality is illusory. You and the book you are reading are one, to the extent that your

perception of the book, as distinct from you, is a mark of your ignorance, or Maya. Our interaction with nature as individuals and objects is thus called our entanglement with nature, or our bondage.

In the end, the deification of nature does not really exalt the world to a high position. Ultimately such a view lowers nature to the point of making it unreal, and our involvement in it becomes our bondage. Here we see why one cannot find real hope for the world in the Eastern view. If the earth as Maya is really unreal, an illusion to be broken from, then its destruction is not that serious a matter. We should not really be concerned with maintaining it or hold a hope for its future.

As far as achieving a hope for the future of the earth, then, the eastern view seems at first to be an improvement over evolution in its attempt to give nature dignity by combining God with nature. But to make everything one with God, or to emphasize only God's immanence, leaves us without real hope for the creation itself, for it will never be set free from evil, sin and decay. Is there another view including both God and creation in some other way?

3. Transcendence and Western Deism

Rather than emphasizing God's immanence in the world, the view which developed in the west in the last two centuries emphasized God's transcendence. As early as the time of the Enlightenment (c. 1750), Christian thinkers started to speak about the world as a big machine that was created by God but now works by itself, a view we call Deism.

In a gradual process, scientists discovered more and more about the laws of nature and asked themselves, "Where do we see the hand of God in this complexity?" Linneus, the 17th century botanist, answered that "one

can only see God's back" (*quasi a tergo*), quoting Exodus 33:23, where the Lord allowed Moses to see him from behind. Francis Bacon, a Christian and universally acknowledged as one of the fathers of modern science, took it a step further. He said:

Nature shows no divine efficiency in its movement or divine form in its structure. It possesses no divine causation, divine motivation or any attributes of divinity. It is formed matter acting through varieties of locomotion inherent within itself and nothing more.

And later scientists like Descartes concluded that, as we observe nature, we see no real difference between man-made machines and the diversity of bodies composed by nature itself.

This combination of a growing belief in God's distance and the orderliness of creation led to the view that the whole of the universe resembled a giant clock. God, as creator, made this clock in the beginning, started it going, and then left it behind to run by itself as a huge machine. The limitation placed on God is immediately clear. God is only the initiator, and the universe runs by itself.

An Isolated World

The consequence, of course, was that human beings themselves are also now seen as complex machines, and God moved further and further away from the daily lives of Western people. If people believed in God, they thought only of God's transcendence. Fewer and fewer people sought to

know God as a personal being involved in their daily lives as Enoch of the Bible, who walked with God. The practice of piety disappeared, and the world seemed increasingly void and meaningless.

The Deistic view, then, emphasizing only God's transcendence, leaves us essentially with a closed system similar to the evolutionary theory. Any possible hope and purpose for the earth and its inhabitants is locked away in the distance with an absent creator God, unavailable to us. We are alone in the machine. If we are Christians, then we go to heaven at the end of our lives, but the material life we leave behind without hope.

The New Age movement now happening in the West is a reaction to the "coldness" of Deism, hoping to bring the Eastern emphasis on God's immanence back into the picture through pantheism. As we saw in the previous section, however, this view of nature as the dance of Shiva moves from one extreme to the other, still without real hope for the future of the earth. Is there another alternative?

According to the Bible, the answer lies in the truth that God is neither only immanent nor only transcendent. The prophet Jeremiah gives us a clue in one sharp question which he asked Israel, in the name of God: "Am I a God at hand, says the Lord, and not a God far off? Can a man hide in a secret place so that I cannot see him? Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (Jeremiah 23: 24).

4. Creation

The fourth view we will consider is the biblical view of God as the personal Creator of the world, a view that accounts for both God's immediate involvement with creation and God's transcendence above it. Pantheism does not offer us any basis for a real meta-narrative about the

future of the earth, nor does Deism with its alliance to evolutionary theory. How different is the biblical view of creation!

The Bible teaches that this world was created. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). God made this world and the surrounding universe as a masterpiece of art. We know even more than former generations about all the planets, stars and galaxies that surround us. More and more we are amazed how exceptionally beautiful our little planet is!

We also have become aware of how fragile it is, circling in the immense space that surrounds us. If the composition of the air that makes life possible varies even a fraction, we will not survive: a change in the carbon dioxide of the atmosphere from 0.03% to 0.05% would have world-shaking effects. This fragile balance is maintained only by God’s intense care and love for the world. Only this concept of creation provides us with hopeful expectations for the future of this planet. Our understanding of creation is foundational.

A Personal and Powerful God

The biblical teaching on the way God is connected and concerned with creation can be summarized in two main points. First, God is intimately present in the world and yet to be distinguished from it. The best way to describe it is by emphasizing that God is personal. He is present in His creation in the same way that a parent is present in a child or an artist in a work of art.

If one compares the creation for a moment with a building with God as its architect, then we should not be looking for the architect in the attic or between the bricks of the basement. Instead, we find His presence in each

detail of creation, where He has put His mark as the great Architect. The Bible says that in this way God is indeed present everywhere, but at the same time He is outside of the world, faithfully maintaining the whole of His creation.

According to the Bible, then, God is immanent and transcendent at the same time. How can this be? This brings us to the second main point. The Bible teaches us that God is not only the great Architect and Creator working from outside, but He is also constantly present in the world to maintain it by the power of His Spirit. In this way, He is continually involved with it, modeling, shaping and renewing it. We find this in Psalm 104:

O Lord, my God, you are very great,
You are clothed with splendor and majesty.
He wraps Himself in light as a garment,
He stretches out the heavens like a tent ...
He makes the clouds as His chariot
And rides on the wings of the wind! (1-4)

O, Lord how manifold are thy works,
In wisdom hast thou made them all.
The earth is full of thy creatures ...
They all look to thee to give them food
in due season;
When thou givest to them, they gather it up;
When thou openest thy hands,
they are filled with good things;
When thou hidest thy face,

they are all dismayed
When thou sendest forth thy Spirit,
they are created,
And thou renewest the face of the ground
(24, 27–30).

This psalm gives us a deepening insight into how overwhelmingly present God is in His creation. We have here a foretaste of the gospel, that God was so involved with the world that He came down Himself to be incarnated as a man!

Touching His Mantle

In Psalm 104, light is called God's mantle, the heavens His tent, and the earth His playground. It follows, then, that there is a place for "religious experience" in nature. We come into contact with the Creator in His works, not directly, but as if the natural world is His handshake. One can "meet" another person with a handshake, but it is possible among humans, of course, to touch someone's hand but not really meet the person.

From the point of view of the Bible, this kind of religious experience in nature is only the touching of God's mantle, like the woman who touched Jesus' clothing in Luke 8:44. Feeling the power and reality of God can fall short of knowing Him personally. People can experience something of God in nature when they are sensitive, but those who merely touch God's creative power or come into contact with His maintaining force may not meet Him in a personal way.

While people in the East and those involved with New Age have misunderstood how to have contact with God through nature, we must also

acknowledge that the typical view of creation in the West is also quite different from the biblical view. Most people in the so-called “Christian cultures” of western Europe and North America have forgotten God’s intense presence in all His works. The Bible instead calls us to a direct awareness of God’s hand in nature and our lives as well.

Laws

When we ask in what way the Lord maintains His creation, Psalm 147 adds something to the teaching of Psalm 104 that should fascinate all scientists who study nature and its laws. God Himself is present in these laws. Laws are His words. We tend to look at laws as automatic, neutral, built-in mechanisms of creation. The Bible teaches that they are instead living, spoken orders from the mouth of the great Designer.

In Psalm 147, the laws of the earth are seen as an army that obeys the orders of the God of Israel:

Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem,
Praise your God, O Zion
He keeps your gates strong ...
He gives a command to the earth,
and what He says is quickly done.
He spreads snow like a blanket
and scatters snow like dust,
He sends hail like gravel,
no one can endure the cold He sends!
Then He gives a command, and ice melts;
He sends his word and waters flow (12, 15–18).

All the processes of nature seem to be under the control of divine commands.

Interestingly, the Bible uses the same expression for the way God commands nature and the way He speaks to His people. The natural ordinances and personal instructions are all one in God, who speaks to the heart of His people.

He sends the word... and the water flows,
He declares His word to Jacob,
His statutes and ordinances to Israel (18-19).

Think of all the laws of the universe that we have discovered through centuries of hard work; these are all divine commands! We see them as unchangeable laws, even as abstract forces. Yet the Bible reveals to us their true nature. God is active through them as a maintaining Creator. These laws are His words, which nature obeys.

Do It Again!

In his book *Orthodoxy*, G. K. Chesterton gives a beautiful illustration of a father playing with his child, blowing up a balloon and letting go of it. The balloon shoots into the air while making a funny noise. The child exclaims with pleasure, "Again! Do it again!" In the same way, wrote Chesterton, God as Creator did not establish abstract laws. For example, when He saw the sunset for the first time, He exclaimed, "Again! Let this happen again! This is beautiful!" And the sun obeyed! The second time, God enjoyed it even more, and He repeated His command. This is why God keeps

commanding, “Again! Do it again! It is good this way.” And so these “laws of nature” came into existence. Seen only through our eyes, they are laws. When we see them through God’s eyes, we see them as His powerful words, keeping the world going.

When we take this teaching seriously, we discover how little difference there is between God’s words as commands to nature and God’s words as His message to the people of the world. In the same flow, Psalm 147 speaks of God’s words as commands to nature (ice, snow, rivers and sun; see also Psalm 7:16-18) and laws spoken to His people, Israel (19). In summary, the Bible speaks of a very intimate relationship between God and His creation. God is continually at work within it: the laws of nature are God’s commands, directing natural life. The laws of Moses are God’s directives for human life.

Hidden in Glory

Nevertheless, the biblical teaching of God’s immanence never minimizes His transcendence. He is at the same time far above us, hidden in His royal palace, untouched by human hands, unseen by human eyes, immortal, invisible, adorable (see Psalm 29, Exodus 33, John 1:18, Isaiah 6).

In pantheism and in New Age thinking, God is not a loving person who created the universe. God is fused with creation as impersonal energy. Deep within all people and all things lie active and stimulating sources of this energy, and people adhering to these beliefs search for contact with this power. In Christianity, however, the emphasis is on communication with a person! In Eastern belief, as we have seen, people strive for impersonal unity; in biblical Christianity, we seek personal community.

What do we say to people who speak about their experience of God without confessing Christ or even reading the Bible? In a discussion about mystical experiences, the well-known Jewish philosopher Martin Buber once said to the equally famous psychologist Carl Jung, “I have known experiences similar to the ones you call divine, but I would never call them an encounter with God. To meet God always means meeting someone who knows me by name!”

The Problem of the Fall

If humans had not fallen into sin, we could stop this book here. But the uniqueness of the revelation of the Bible about this world lies in its teachings about the fall of humans just after the beginning. Somewhere in the distant past, our ancestors Adam and Eve rebelled against their Creator. This had far-reaching consequences for all of Creation, not only for humankind but also for the earth. In *Genesis* we read that the earth was cursed as a result of this rebellion (3:17) (see chapter 3).

What must be explained here is that since the fall, the earth is not the way it used to be. Nature is no longer running as God originally intended it to be. Furthermore, the laws of nature are no longer direct expressions of divine commands by definition. Natural disasters, cruel animals and poisonous plants are all part of the proof to us of the biblical truth that nature is also cursed.

At the same time, however, God is not unfaithful. The Bible teaches that the Lord has decided to save His creation, human beings and the world. Though this salvation will not come in full until He chooses, as proof of His power in the present moment, God upholds His creation in the meantime. Even where sin and death have entered the world they cannot

wipe away completely the ordinances God established in nature and in the moral laws He gave to man.

Although there is a shadow over God's presence in the world, it is all the more impressive to see how He Himself has overcome this shadow and will eventually conquer it completely through the special revelation of His word to us, particularly through His son Jesus Christ. This has many consequences for the earth as well. In the rest of this book we will discuss the primary effect of God's saving act, namely the regeneration of this whole world according to God's original plan.

A High View of the Earth

What does the "regeneration of the world" imply? This leads me back to the main point of this second chapter, that the biblical view of the earth as God's creation is a very high one. The Bible teaches us true respect for Creation. The true value, dignity and majesty of the earth as a permanent object of God's creative power must be rediscovered, even by many Christians.

Many Christians know that this view of the earth is biblical. Nevertheless, many times they are also influenced by Platonic teaching that this world is ultimately just a shadow of the real world, that this world is only a temporary dwelling place and the real thing is going to heaven after an earthly life. But is this really the biblical view?

In the Bible we read that God wanted this world to be here. He wanted human beings to be His governors on it, and He has promised to remain faithful to the Creation which He so wondrously made. Of course, the Bible also teaches us that after creation, humans rebelled, and because of this, the earth was cursed. The point here is this: When speaking of His

redemptive work, God never meant that He would destroy this cursed earth completely; rather, He said He would deliver it from the curse.

At one point God almost obliterated all life at the Flood (Genesis 9). We know from the story that afterward He promised, “never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (9:11). That is why He set His rainbow in the clouds, as the sign of His covenant not only with humanity but also with the animals, trees and birds, with the whole of nature, that He would never again destroy the earth. We read again and again in the Psalms how wonderful it is that God is faithful to the works of his hands (e.g., Psalm 138:8).

Nothing to Be Rejected!

In the New Testament as well, Paul builds his apostolic teaching on this concept of Creation. He speaks in 1 Timothy 4 of teachers in the early Christian church who had a low view of God’s creation and institutions. They believed that things like marriage and good food were to be rejected because these belonged to the lower materialistic world created not by the God of love but by lower gods. In this scheme, called Gnosticism, humans must free themselves from this world by abstinence and spiritual concentration.

Paul adds that at the end times this super-spiritual heresy will return with new power and attraction. We must be aware of it, recognize it, and avoid it. While it may have a very attractive spiritual appearance with its emphasis on meditation and a critical rejection of the world, it is still, as Paul says, the work of deceitful spirits and therefore heretical. Why? Because it despises that which God has created.

This is the point: we know that we live in a fallen world, but it still remains God's Creation. In 1 *Timothy* 4:4, Paul summarizes the calling of a Christian as heir to the earth by saying emphatically, "everything that God created is good." He is referring here to God's own words in Genesis 1. After each day of creation the Lord said, "behold, it is good." The sixth time it was even "very good!" When Paul says that everything God created is good, this means it is to be enjoyed. No part of it is to be rejected.

Of course, we must not neglect what else the Bible says about our enjoyment of creation, namely that it must be received with thanksgiving, consecrated by the word of God and by prayer. This high view of God's creation is more enhanced by many other biblical promises concerning the restoration of the world. In the Christian world there has been too little understanding of these promises. We will return to these promises in the following chapters.

Citizens of God's Kingdom

Finally, this chapter would not be complete without a consideration of what the biblical doctrine of Creation means practically for us today. How do these ideas influence our daily lives in this world as Christians? The answer is simple: we should be moved as Christians to have a deep involvement in the well-being of this world as God's creation. Surely this points to the hope we have been looking for!

Dr. Hans Rookmaaker often expressed it this way: Christ did not come down from heaven just to make humans into Christians, he came to make Christians human. In other words, Christ did not come to change the human race into a race of heavenly citizens, he came to restore us into the earth-involved images of God we were created to be.

Similarly, when Paul says in Philippians that “our commonwealth [or citizenship] is in heaven” (3:20), he does not mean simply that our future, our final destiny, is away from here in heaven. Paul adds in the following verse that heaven is the place “from which we await our Savior, who will change our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body” (20-21). “Our citizenship is in heaven” means that our legal right to be citizens of God’s kingdom is hidden in Christ, who is now in heaven. But Christ will come back to earth to establish the kingdom he has begun here already.

To Serve the Earth

The practical implication of this view on God’s plan for the world is a renewal of God’s original command for humans to have dominion over the earth and to be responsible for all that God created (Genesis 1:28-30). Human beings are called to continue the creative work of God, not like God who created out of nothing, but as creatures, dependent on the “material” that God has provided. Obedience is an exciting prospect, as we are free to do this in all kinds of creative, caring, and preserving ways.

In Genesis 2:15, the command is expressed with specific words, “God took man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and to guard it.” It is important to pay attention to the verbs here. The Hebrew word for “cultivate” incorporates the word for “servant.” In fact, you could also translate it, “to serve it.” The second verb speaks of protection and upholding something against all kinds of danger.

Sometimes the commands in Genesis 1:28 and 2:15 have been misinterpreted as “to master” or even “to manipulate” the creation. Christians have long been accused of holding a world view that inevitably leads to pollution and the abuse of nature (see Francis Schaeffer’s

Pollution and the Death of Man, page 70). We must admit that when Christians speak as if they were masters of creation and could therefore treat it in whatever way they wanted, including neglect in the name of some other ideal, they are in conflict with the world view they claim to uphold and in conflict with the Bible itself.

Our Responsibility

The Bible teaches us to care for Creation, to work to preserve and improve it, not as a piece of our own property but as something God has lent to us. Paul echoes the Creation commands of the Old Testament when he teaches that Christians are responsible to care for and enjoy all the many aspects of life on this earth, for example the marriages we have and the food we eat (1 Timothy 4:3). This is a serious call to develop the world, to work in the fields of art, science, politics and economics. Christians should not withdraw from any of these fields but on the contrary should be active in all of them, because they each deal with a part of God's Creation. We will discover that God Himself is more deeply present in all parts of His work than we have ever imagined.

I will close this chapter with a quote from Dr. Hans Rookmaaker's book *The Creative Gift*:

The new life in Christ is all-inclusive. It means living creatively with God's help, through prayer. In Christ, God gives us the possibility of living; it remains for us to build on this possibility, this foundation, with the talents we have been given—whether to sing, to paint, to

build, or to manage a home. But in order to erect a building that is more than hay or stubble, we must let Christ produce the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. That is what it means to be truly human (68).

The message of the Bible is clear: the foundation of our hope for the future of the earth lies in the biblical doctrine of Creation. Our calling is to serve, cultivate and guard the world we live in. But what do we make of those biblical passages that seem to predict the destruction of this world? Why has there been so much misunderstanding in this area? Armed with the proper foundation, let us now look at what the Bible says about the future of the earth.

Chapter 3: Like A Refiner's Fire — 2 Peter 3:10

Many Christians, if asked about the future of the world, will immediately refer to 2 Peter 3. This passage talks about the future of our world: “The day of the Lord will come like a thief and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise and the elements will be dissolved with fire. And the earth and the work upon it will be *burned up*” (emphasis added). Other translations give “laid bare” or “destroyed with intense heat” (2 Peter 3:10).

At the beginning of this chapter Peter compares the future of the world with a kind of fire to be passed through. In the same way, the world in Noah's time went through the flood: “By the same word the heavens and

earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (2 Peter 3:7). It is also important to look at verse 13: “But according to his promise, we wait for a new heaven and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.” In these three verses we see what Peter described to be the future of the world.

Common Misinterpretations of 2 Peter 3:10

The conclusion from a quick reading of Peter’s second letter seems to be that the earth will undoubtedly perish. A completely new world will be created afterwards. But this explanation leads us to an apparent contradiction with *Romans 8:22*. There Paul uses the picture of a pregnant woman for our present world, thus underlining a continuity between what is and what is to come. And what do we make of Jesus’ promise in the Beatitudes that the meek will inherit the earth (*Matthew 5:5*)? When we turn back to 2 Peter 3 with these considerations, we discover to our surprise that several of the quick conclusions from this chapter are not all so convincing and seemingly clear as they might have seemed at first glance.

The most exciting discovery is the correct reading of verse 10b. When we move back from our translation to the original Greek text, we discover the actual meaning is as follows:

The day of the Lord will come like a thief and the heavens will pass away with a loud noise and the elements will be removed through fire, *but the earth and the works upon it will be found* (emphasis added).

The Scofield Bible comes very close to the original translation: “The earth and the works upon it will be laid bare.” Most of the English translations, however, simply changed the text or followed a reading of later manuscripts in the direction of a “doomsday” translation like “and the earth and the works upon it will be destroyed.”

It is understandable that people came to this later translation because they wanted to harmonize the last sentence of verse 10 with the preceding sentences. They thought, because the first part of verse 10 speaks about destruction, the last part could not contradict it and should have a similar content. But is this necessary? Could it not be the purpose of Peter’s teaching to make clear that we, as believers, should *not* believe in the destruction of this earth? Peter would be contradicting the Stoics, who expected the destruction of this world by fire.

For biblical scholars, however, the manuscripts should decide the meaning. The main manuscripts and the most authoritative ones have a reading contrary to the King James translation. They read that “the earth and the works upon it will be found.” Two of the three main ancient manuscripts, the *Sinaiticus* and the *Vaticanus* (both from the 4th century) and many others of a later date, have this reading of the text. Therefore the most authoritative edition of the Greek New Testament, Nestle, gives the reading *heuretesetai*. There are manuscripts with other words, but their different reading is explained by the assumption already stated, namely that the last sentence should be in harmony with the preceding ones. Following the principle that the “more difficult” reading should prevail, Bible scholars generally conclude that *heuretesetai* is the best reading. (See, for example, *The New Bible Commentary*.)

I prefer this literal translation “will be found” to the *Scofield Bible’s* “will be laid bare,” although here it is at least implied that the earth and its works will come through the fire and not be totally destroyed. It is amazing to see that several later manuscripts gave themselves the freedom to add the word “not” or to change the word *heuresetai* into *ruesetai* or *ek purothesetai*. For further study read *The Law and the Elements of the World*, an exegetical study by A.J. Bandstra (Kok: Holland; p. 164).

The translation “will be found” is also better because it brings out the connection between the word “find” in v. 10 and the word “find” in v. 14: “Be diligent that you may be *found* in his sight, in peace, without spot and blameless.” This makes it probable that the word “find” should be understood in both verses 10 and 14 as “being led through a process of judicial enquiry.” (See Bandstra, p. 47; cf. *Revelation 12:8*.)

Further support for the literal translation “will be found” is provided by comparison with the other texts in the New Testament where we read the same words, e.g. *Luke 15:9* and *24*: “My son here was lost but now he is found” (*Luke 15:24*). He went through a deep crisis but he has happily come through. In the same way the earth and the works upon it will go through the fire of God’s judgment, but they will come through. This is good news, and completely in harmony with *Revelation 14:13*: “and their works do follow them” (cf. *Revelation 21:24*).

When everyone expects Peter to say that the earth and the works upon it—that is nature and culture—are going to be crushed and lost beneath a passing heaven and burning elements, he professes quite the opposite. His argument is as follows: “What all the Stoics believe, namely that in this way nature and culture will disappear, we, as Judeo-Christian

believers in the wake of God's covenant with Noah, do not believe. We can rest assured that the earth and all its works *will be found!*"

Starting from this point we begin to discover other points that have generally been read with the wrong spectacles on.

1. "The Elements"

First is the word "elements" as in "the elements will be burned away," which is the sentence preceding the one we have just translated. We remember "elements" from our chemistry lessons at school. Water is H₂O, H and O being elements. So to many modern readers of Peter's letter, this word gives them an immediate image of the most basic particles of created reality. When Peter says that they will be burned away, we have visions of a nuclear holocaust in the form of the Chernobyl catastrophe or Hiroshima with the mushroom cloud on the horizon. That would certainly mean the end of nature and the evaporation of cultures—a very frightening perspective. But is that the meaning of Peter's words? The Greek word for elements is *stoicheia*. In Stoic philosophy, these *stoicheia* were earth, water, air and fire, the four components that constitute our reality. But that translation doesn't fit this text, as fire would burn them all away and at the same time be one of the four components. Literally, the word *stoicheia* means: that which stands in a row (= *stoichos*). This literal meaning comes through in one passage in the New Testament, Hebrews 5:12, where it should be translated "the ABC (of Christian doctrine)." A study of this word in its context in other parts of the New Testament (Galatians 4:3, 9; Colossians 2:8, 20) gives us the conviction that it has negative connotations. In Galatians it is translated as "idle spirits" or "weak and pitiful ruling spirits" or "principles" which keep us captive. These "spirits"

sometimes were identified with stars and configurations of stars in the same way as astrologers do today.

Stoicheia should therefore be translated here as something that belongs to the heavens, in the same way as in the second sentence “the works” are something that belongs to the earth. This gives us the clue to look for the meaning of this word and of Peter’s expression that the elements will be burned away. It is a further explanation of the sentence, “the heavens shall pass away with great noise.” This would go along with the verse from the book of *Isaiah*, that must have been in Peter’s mind; “the *HOST* of heavens shall be dissolved.” (Isaiah 34:4, emphasis added). In the New Testament Jesus quotes this word describing how “the heavens will be darkened... and the *POWERS* of heaven shall be shaken” (emphasis added). It seems as if the word for powers of heaven, *dunameis*, means the same as the word *stoicheia* in 2 *Peter* 3:10, so that the most appropriate translation would be the one from the Good News Bible: “the heavens shall disappear with a shrill noise, and *the heavenly bodies* will burn up and be destroyed” (emphasis added). Then the earth and the works upon it will be found bare before the Creator who will purify them in the fire of his judgment.

2. The “Fire”

This leads to an explanation of the fire. In studying this word we make another interesting discovery. Peter’s teaching about the coming of the Lord is based on the Old Testament book of *Malachi*, chapter 3:

“Behold I send my messenger to prepare the way before me and the Lord whom you seek shall

suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold he is coming," says the Lord of hosts. "But who can endure his coming, who can stand when he appears? *For he is like a refiner's fire* and like a fuller's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver until they present right offerings to the Lord" (emphasis added).

This is a prophecy of the coming of the Lord, that he will come with fire. But immediately it says that it will be a refiner's fire, and Malachi compares it with the fire used by a silversmith. He heats up stone containing silver so that, when the silver comes out, it has been purified and cleansed. Everything which is worthless is discarded. Suddenly one sees a completely different picture of fire. Doctors used to put their instruments in a fire to get them free of bacteria. We find this picture of fire in some significant places in the Old Testament, e.g. in *Exodus 3*. At the beginning of God's revelation to Moses, he appears in a burning bush (cf. *Micah 1:4; Jeremiah 9:7; Ezekiel 22:20-22; Zechariah 13:9*). Here the same image of a refining fire is presented; it burns and yet it does not destroy.

3. "Destruction"

In turning back to 2 Peter 3, one makes a third discovery. The word "destruction" was never supposed to be applied to the world itself, but to

the “ungodly men” in verse 7, and to the “elements” in verse 10. It is remarkable that Peter, in the short repetition of his prophecy in verse 12, only speaks of the destruction of heaven and elements. In fact it all fits with the main comparison that Peter makes at the beginning of the chapter, namely the flood. The flood of Noah’s time did not destroy the world either. The water and the fire are symbols which emphasize cleansing.

4. “The New Creation”

Thus we have established the following points: first, that the earth and the works upon it will be found; second, that the elements are evil things threatening the Creation or just the heavenly powers, but not the created elements of the earth; and third, that the fire is a refining fire (and the destruction of ungodly men fits this picture). There is one final point to be made. In 2 *Peter* 3:13, we read “in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a *new* heaven and a *new* earth, the home of righteousness” (emphasis added). The Greek has two words for “new:” *neos* and *kainos*. These words have slightly differing meanings. *Neos* means brand-new. You might refer to a baby as *neos*. The term neonatal used commonly to denote the newborn period in the medical world comes from this root. The word *kainos* should be translated *renewed*—a renewal of something that has become estranged from its original purpose. If your bicycle is broken and you replace a tire or the saddle, you are renewing the old bicycle.

When the New Testament speaks about our being a new creation in Christ (2 *Corinthians* 5) it should be realized that the word “new” is not *neos*. We are not a brand-new creation as if the old creation had been a

waste. Why would God have put all that effort into world history in order to save the old creation? For what reason would he have continued with it other than to renew it? So here the word used is *kainos* which means that in Christ we are a *renewed* creation. Therefore we could call Jesus Christ the “Re-Creator.” The savior will not create a brand new world out of a vacuum. This is not a biblical picture. The biblical picture is: We believe in a God (*Psalms 121, 138*) who is faithful to that which his hand began; who is faithful to the earth and his Creation. The whole of the Old Testament emphasizes that God’s work, his redeeming power, is meant to renew this world, to cleanse it from sin, to take away all brokenness, to remove death, and to glorify it into a renewed world.

This world will not just perish; it will be transformed. Let us not speak of the destruction of this world, but of its *transformation* as a result of God’s judgment (cf. 1 Corinthians 15).

Chapter 4: In Labor — Romans 8:22

The proper understanding of 2 Peter 3 provides us with an insight into the unity of the biblical message concerning the future of this world. If this is accepted, other passages that speak of a hopeful future suddenly fall into place. I am thinking especially of *Romans 8*, where Paul ends his exposition of the Christian message with a description of the hopeful future for this world: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the sons of God to be revealed.”

Paul speaks with striking optimism about the future of *this* creation. He clearly teaches that this world as we know it is a fallen world: “creation was subjected to frustration”—but not in order to be destroyed. “Yet there is hope that the creation itself will one day be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.” (18-21).

Paul then comes to his moving comparison in verse 22: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (22-24).

Here Paul himself makes the distinction between “we ourselves” and “the whole of creation,” which cannot be explained in any other way except that there is also hope for the external world of animals and plants, mountains and lakes. We see futility and decay everywhere, but those who have heard the message of the resurrection of Christ now hear a deeper moaning and groaning beyond this: the pain of nature is labor pain. This idea is expressed clearly in one other place in the New Testament, in a discussion between Jesus and his disciples. Peter had asked Jesus, “We have left everything and followed you—what will we have?” And Jesus answered him, “You who have followed me will share in my royal glory *in the regeneration*, when the Son of man will appear” (Matthew 19:28, emphasis added). The words “in the regeneration” (*palin genesia*), refer to the renewal of the whole of creation as a kind of new birth.

Pollution and the Death of Man

In 1970 Dr. F. A. Schaeffer wrote a book on pollution. He was one of the first in the Christian world to be alarmed by the destruction of nature as a result of our human-centered consumption society. He wrote, “Modern man has no real value for nature. All he has is the most crass form of egoist, pragmatic value for it. He treats it as a thing in the worst possible sense, to exploit for the ‘good’ of man” (p. 58).

A *Time* magazine article (September 19, 1988) tells how the future of this earth is in real danger as a result of three problems in the environment:

1. The “Greenhouse” Effect

The industrial age has been fueled by the burning of coal, wood, and oil, which spews wastes—most notably carbon dioxide—into the sky. This thickens the layer of atmospheric gases that traps heat from the sun and keeps the earth warm. This greenhouse effect is expected to bring about change more quickly than any other climatic event in the earth’s history...melting enough of the polar ice caps to threaten the water supply of New York City and the very existence of low-lying New Orleans...productive farmland would become parched and dusty.

2. The Thinning Ozone Layer

This is being caused mainly by the production of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), chemical compounds that can be found in Styrofoam cups and fast-food containers and in the Freon used in air conditioners and grocery refrigeration cases. The CFCs float up into the stratosphere and break down the layer of ozone gas, which serves as a shield

protecting the earth from much of the sun's harmful ultraviolet radiation. One result...more cases of skin cancer.

3. Acid rain and forest destruction

So that the lungs of the earth are destroyed. This article limits itself to dealing with the effects of pollution on the U.S., but these three problems will have dire consequences for the whole planet.

On the second page of his book *Pollution and the Death of Man*, Dr. Schaeffer tells of his visit to a man in California who had arranged a tombstone on the coast of the Pacific Ocean and carved this epitaph on it:

Died A.D. 1979
The Oceans born—the Lord gave
The Oceans died—man has taken away
Cursed be the name of man

The author of this epitaph is one of many who are worried about the pollution of nature. Even in the middle of the oceans, birds and fish are dying because of the chemicals that we dump there. This tombstone should wake us up.

At the same time, however, we as Christians standing in the stream of Judeo-Christian teaching should be saying, "Stop a moment—you have put the wrong date on the stone. It was not in 1979 that the oceans died. They

died long before that.” This is the profound meaning behind Genesis 3 and, in sharp contrast to that, *2 Corinthians* 5:17.

Genesis 3 tells of the reality of the historic Fall of man. The moment Adam and Eve sinned against God, a curse was laid upon the whole of creation:

Because you have sinned
Cursed be the earth
from now on it will bring forth
thorns and thistles
and death will be the end
of every living creature:
dust thou art and to dust thou wilt return.

These words show the situation of nature to be much worse than any green party has phrased it. The oceans died long ago. When man sinned the whole of nature was put under the law of death (*Romans* 8:20, 22). We observe today the serious result of what happened deep down at the beginning of mankind. On the tombstone should be written:

Died in the Garden of Eden
The oceans, the skies, animals and plants

The Bible teaches that it all died with the death of man.

Creation Transformed

However, once we have understood this connection between the fall of man and the fall of nature, we can also understand the joy of the message of the Gospel, not only for humans but also for the whole of creation. I refer here to 2 Corinthians 5:17. There must have been a reason for Paul to have phrased it like he did. Linguistically it would have been normal to have said, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new *creature*.” That would fit. But Paul deliberately talks about a new “creation” and adds, according to Isaiah’s prophecy, “the old has passed, the new has come” (Isaiah 43:16-21).

This is what the Lord says—

He who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,
who drew out the chariots and horses,
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:

Forget the former things;

do not dwell on the past

See I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the desert and streams
in the wasteland.

The wild animals honor me,

The jackals and the owls,

because I provide water in the desert
and streams in the wasteland,

to give drink to my people, my chosen,
the people I formed for myself
that they may proclaim my praise.
(*emphasis added*)

We have narrowed the message of the Gospel. In the first place it is good news for man, because he has received a message of life in the midst of death: “My son here was dead, but now he is alive.” But the power of the work of Christ is much wider than only the redemption of man. The whole creation will receive life out of death (*Romans 8:22*) and all the nations will be revived (*Romans 11:25*). This is what Paul had in mind when he said consciously, “in Christ we are a new creation.” Man redeemed through Christ draws a completely renewed world behind him.

Sadly the eyes of many Christians have been closed to this fully biblical statement. Christians have been involved in the abuse of nature just as non-Christians. This is because they have had what Schaeffer calls a “platonic spirituality.” They believed that the material world was not as important as the spiritual world. But again and again Schaeffer asks the question, “How is it possible to love God without respecting the things he has made?”

Part of the problem has been that Christians have misunderstood the biblical promises about the future of this earth. God made a covenant with the whole of creation (see *Genesis 9*), and Christ’s death will redeem all nature from the evil consequences of the Fall. In the same way that the Fall of man led to the fall of creation, so the redemption of man will lead to the redemption of nature.

In *Romans 8* the redemption of nature is compared with the birth of a child. When Jesus returns and the children of Adam and Eve are set free from sin and death, the whole of creation will be reborn. I believe in the new birth of animals, trees, oceans, and clouds which have been tremendously damaged as a result of sin.

In *1 Corinthians 15* Paul writes of a process of transformation. He uses the expression “changing clothes:” “Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality” (51-53). The words he uses here mean literally “to put on different clothes.” The outward appearance will change.

There are analogies to this in nature, for instance the butterfly coming out of the cocoon. If you look at a butterfly and at a cocoon, you would never think that out of the cocoon such a beautiful creature could emerge and fly. The same can be said of the dragonfly. This insect starts its life as a little larva in a mud depression of submerged water. The larva grows stronger and bigger and makes its way to the surface of the water. When the time is ripe, it climbs out of the water and changes into a dragonfly.

If you study these images there does come a point when the preacher should emphasize the continuity. It is true the judgment of God will burn away a lot of things and the whole world will be burned with the fire of God’s judgment, but there are moments that the preacher should say, “Listen! God remains faithful to his creation. He put a rainbow over this world in the covenant with Noah, and this was a covenant with the whole of creation, including animals, plants, seasons and the sky. God promised

to be faithful to this creation.” Therefore, the earth and the works upon it will be found as the New Testament makes clear in several passages (*Revelation 21 & 22; 2 Corinthians 5:1 ff*).

The Scaffolding

Why is it important to emphasize this? Because a certain type of doomsday thinking about the future of this world has weakened our resistance to pollution. Chernobyl, the breakdown of the ozone layer, the acidity of the forests as a result of bad air, the poisonous deposits in the ground, drinking water problems, the cutting down of tropical rain forests and the advance of deserts: these are taken merely as apocalyptic signs. But they should rather be taken as last-minute alarm calls to direct ourselves towards God’s future. He wants us to be concerned and to be working in the world right now as his children, working towards its renewal. That is our calling—to give a foretaste of the coming renewal.

Jesus did not feed the crowd before he had first commanded the disciples, “You yourselves give them something to eat.” When they offered him the five loaves and two fish, which was all they had, he used those tiny things to perform his miracle (*Matthew 14:16-20*). In the same way, at his return, the Lord will ask us, “What did you do with my creation to renew it?” Then he will multiply our finite achievements into the promised total renewal. To use Paul’s image of changing clothes in *1 Corinthians 15*, he will take the tiny and weak threads and weave them into new garments with which he will clothe the world. There is a reason why the Holy Spirit is called the first fruit of the new creation (*Romans 8:23*).

So there is a challenging and important relationship between the works we are called to do now in order to save nature—to purify the water,

to preserve the ozone layer, to plant trees instead of cutting them, to care about safe forms of energy—and the future renewal of the earth. God does not *need* our works to accomplish that; he could do it without us. But he will use our work and he will certainly rebuke us if we have not produced the work he expected. He will ask for them and he will make them the core of a renewed world.

As Dr. W. Van Bruggen put it, “It is dangerous to identify our cultural achievements with the kingdom of God, but we should say that the kingdom of God is present in the signs that precede it. They are the milestones, bricks, ingredients, *the scaffolding* of the coming empire, real foreshadowings as a demonstration of the things to come” (*Futurm and Eschaton*, p. 173).

Chapter 5: Changing Clothes — Psalm 102

When I discuss the future of this world, as I have done in the previous chapters of this book, I always meet with an ambivalent reaction. On the one hand, people are fascinated and interested; on the other hand, they come up with several biblical passages which seem to emphasize the discontinuity of this world and the next so strongly that no continuity can be maintained. In this chapter, I want to look at those objections. And as this book is primarily meant to be an aid to Bible study, I will focus on the biblical texts which seem to contradict the continuity (which I have emphasized) between this world and the next.

In the course of many conferences and discussions, I have discovered how hard it is to keep the proper balance. It is easy to over-emphasize the continuity between this world and the next when the audience seems to believe that there is only discontinuity; I do not want to minimize for one moment the severity and the depth of God's judgment. The fact that the judgment is compared with fire is certainly not meant to be a soft touch. This world and the works in it must go through the deep waters of the judgment of God. How painful and sad that is can be seen at the foot of the cross of Christ. Here the depth of God's judgment is revealed in the one who took upon himself all the sins of this world. No one can ever say that the *continuity* which was there (because Jesus rose from the dead), made his suffering on the cross and his death unimportant or transient or petty. No. For all eternity we can rejoice that someone has taken away for us that deep black pit of hell which he had to suffer.

The judgment over this world, which the Bible teaches as a future event (Matthew 25; 2 Thessalonians 2) is the aftermath of this judgment over Christ for all who have not listened to the message of the Messiah. Certainly that is deep, and never to be minimized. This is the reason that we sometimes discover passages in the Bible where it seems as if there is only discontinuity.

1. Creation Glorified

First, Matthew 24:34: Jesus said, "Believe me, this generation will not disappear until all this has taken place. Earth and sky will pass away, but my words will never pass away. But about that actual day and time no one knows" (translation: J.B. Phillips). Here Jesus refers to a future day in which heaven and earth (or as Phillips translates, earth and sky), will pass

away. When they pass away, there will be no place for them (Revelation 20:11). So that apparently proves it. How is it possible to believe in any form of continuity if this is going to happen?

In this passage when Jesus quotes the Old Testament as follows: "Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away," he was paraphrasing Psalm 102:24-28:

O Lord, you live forever.
Long ago you created the earth
and with your own hands you made the heavens.
They will disappear but you will remain;
they will all wear out like clothes.
You will discard them like clothes
and they will vanish.
But you are always the same
and your life never ends.
(translation: Good News)

In the old King James translation we read:

They (the earth and the heavens) shall perish,
but thou shalt endure:
yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment;
as a vesture thou shalt change them,
and they shall be changed.

When we read this passage we cannot avoid the conclusion that the psalmist draws a parallel between the statement, “heaven and earth will pass away” (or “disappear” or “perish”), and the statement, “they will all be changed like clothes.” The old clothes will be taken away, and be completely destroyed. The second sentence, with the same picture of the changing of clothes that we have already seen in the New Testament (1 *Corinthians* 15:52-54), gives a balanced statement about the coming judgment. Never is it meant to be a judgment that will destroy the earth itself as God’s creation; what will be destroyed is only the appearance of this earth and heaven in its subjection to sin, futility and death (*Romans* 8).

In this connection Calvin wrote in his commentary on *Psalms* 102 that we should not draw the wrong conclusions from this passage, thinking that it teaches the total destruction of heaven and earth: “For although they will not be completely destroyed, the change of their nature will consume that which is mortal and perishable, in order that they may be renewed according to *Romans* 8.”

In studying the passage in *Matthew* 24 we should read Jesus’ statement against the background of *Psalms* 102, realizing that Jesus never meant to say that the heavens and earth as God’s creation will be destroyed. They will change clothes; will be glorified. This certainly means the end of the earth as we know it, under subjection to sin and death after the Fall. We should put our trust not in this world, but in Jesus’ words. They cover the whole created world and promise its renewal. That is our only hope in times of nuclear arms and threatening pollution. His words guarantee the coming of the Kingdom on this earth. That kingdom is not of this world (*John* 18:36)—but is certainly meant to rule this earth as the

waters cover the sea. Its origin is in God, but its final purpose is this earth as God's creation.

2. The Sorting Machine

The second apparently difficult passage is *Hebrews 12:25-27*: "See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, 'Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens'" (*Haggai 2:6*). The words 'once more' indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain" (NIV). Does this passage not clearly speak of a future in which not only the earth but also the heavens are shaken? Does that not mean that this earth will be "removed," as the King James Version translates?

The first discovery we make in studying the Greek is the mistranslation of the word "removed." In Greek, we have the word *metathesis*, which means transformation or change. (See Kittel's *Theological Dictionary* abridged by G. Bromiley, Eerdmans, p. 1179). The things that are made (and that are called shakable) will be transformed at the moment of this "shaking," so that what remains is that which is unshakable: the glorified creation of the Kingdom of God.

Here again it is important to remember the Old Testament. The author of *Hebrews* quotes from the prophet *Haggai 2:6-7, 9*: "This is what the Lord Almighty says, 'In a little while I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations and the desire of all nations will come and I will fill this house with glory,' says the Lord

Almighty. ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the Lord Almighty.”

I have given the whole passage of *Haggai* because, in its original form, the passage quoted in Hebrews is very encouraging. There was nothing in Haggai’s mind that can be explained as an expectation of the end of this world—quite the contrary. He prophesies God’s judgment over heaven and earth, which especially means his righteous hand ruling over all the nations. This will shake them to their foundations; but it will purify them so that their treasures will come out, and then they will bring in their glory to the renewed temple in Jerusalem. When the writer of *Hebrews* comes to the joyful description of the new Jerusalem (*Hebrews* 12:22-24), he remembers Haggai’s promises and warns the believers that this new heavenly city will come only after a time of judgment, as Haggai prophesied. That is certainly a shaking experience.

In my birthplace, Lisse, I grew up among tulip fields. When the tulip bulbs were taken out of the ground, they were led by conveyor belts into a “bulb-shaking machine.” From an early age I remember, throughout the months of June and July, hearing the booming and shaking noise of those machines that beat the bulbs so that the mud and the stones fell off. When the process was completed the tulip bulbs came out beautifully ordered to be sold all over the world.

The shaking was never meant to destroy the harvest. Quite the contrary: it was meant to separate the good fruits from the mud and dirt. This is what Haggai had in mind when he talked about the shaking judgment of God, and *Hebrews* takes it over in the same form. “Once more

the Lord will shake the earth,” not to destroy it, but “in order that those things that cannot be shaken remain” (*Hebrews 12:27*).

Hebrews 12 turns out to be a powerful witness to the same joyful message that the Lord will not destroy the earth but change it. What we expect to happen in the future is a transformation, *metathesis*, of this world.

New Heavens and a New Earth

In *Revelation 21:22* there is a beautiful picture of the New Jerusalem after it has descended from heaven: “And I saw no temple in the city for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.” This means that there is a oneness in heaven and earth. The heaven will pass away and God will live on the earth. Then we read, “The city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it for the glory of God and its light and its Lamb is the lamp. By its lamp shall the nations walk and the *kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it*. And its gates shall never be shut by day and there shall be no night there. And they shall bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations” (emphasis added). Suddenly you have a glimpse of the beauty of that future world. All those nations with their history, with their culture: the beautiful paintings that the Mexicans did 2000 years ago, Bach’s works in Germany, Rembrandt’s in Holland, Linneus’ in Sweden, the cathedrals, all the works of art and music—these are not waste that will disappear. The nations will bring their works, their glory into it. It should certainly be cleansed, because there is no piece of art without sin in it. Human culture will be present, but cleansed to a renewed and glorified state in the new world. Then we will understand that human history has not been meaningless.

The Meaning of History

Many evangelical Christians believe that the only real purpose of history is the production of souls to live in heaven in a completely new world of which they have no imagination. This is far too narrow a view. The Bible says something different: God created the world, began history, and saw that it went wrong. But he did not stop. Rather, he was faithful to his creation, faithful to mankind, and gave history the full opportunity to develop.

Nations evolved and cultures arose with creativity and works of art. Later on, science received a leading role, and technology was born. The result was a whole flow of human history in which God's creation could develop in spite of sin. God wanted all this to happen. He knew it was a sinful world and that this is why he sent Jesus Christ, to bring renewal and recreation and redemption to this world. Therefore, in order to save the future of this world with all its nationalities and to have them renewed and cleansed through the blood of Jesus Christ, he gave people and nations the freedom to live and to act responsibly towards nature. This biblical teaching gives tremendous emphasis to the validity and importance of culture.

I once heard an evangelist say, "We work only because God has commanded us to do so." It was as if he wanted to say, "In itself, life is meaningless because finally we will all be burned up (which he actually said later), but in the meantime we just have to be obedient." This is absurd. God's will and commands are not arbitrary. As a Father, interested in our growth, he does not demand blind obedience without understanding his purposes. The Lord's commands are meaningful. It is meaningful to

raise children; it is meaningful to go to an office or to build a bridge; it is meaningful to work on creative art, or even to do dull work as a part of society—dull work also has to be done and receives its delegated meaning from the whole. Scripture emphasizes the meaningfulness of work and the importance of involvement in culture.

The View of the Old Testament Prophets

The importance of this earth is illustrated in the Old Testament promises about the future. An amazing number of the prophecies are related to the renewal of the world: *Isaiah* 2:1-5; 11:6-11; 25; 35; 65:21-25; *Ezekiel* 37; 47; *Hosea* 13; *Micah* 4; 5. In teaching about the end time *Isaiah* emphasizes:

He shall judge between nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore (2:4).

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my

holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (11:6-9).

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a feeble heart, "Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert (35:1-6).

We see how the prophets dreamed about a renewed world. Their dream was not of a "brand new" world, a shadow-less and strange eternity about which no one can be enthusiastic. They were concerned with a real world. When Peter says, "I want to remind you of the words of the prophets" (2 Peter 3:2), must we not conclude that it was these visions he had in his mind?

Chapter 6: Heaven: A Waiting Room—*Revelation 6*

“But do Christians not go to heaven when they die?” In this chapter, I want to consider various answers to this question. The question arises as a reaction to the biblical promises that “the righteous will inherit the earth” (*Psalms 37:9, Matthew 5:5*). Is it unbiblical to speak about a heavenly future for the believer?

When we study the Bible’s teaching on this question we discover a certain amount of reticence in regard to it. Paul speaks clearly about his desire to be with the Lord when he dies. But he never makes explicitly clear what that means, how life outside the body is possible and what kind of heavenly life he expects. But when Paul says, “My desire is to depart and be with the Lord” (*Philippians 1:23*), what he certainly means is that his personal existence will continue beyond his death. He will have a future in heaven, as that is the place where the Lord is right now. That is why I believe that it is right to talk about going to heaven. However, it would be more accurate to speak about “being with the Lord.” This avoids the misunderstanding that heaven will be our definite and final resting place. It also avoids romantic expectations and fantasies about heavenly happiness (*Glückseligkeiten*), something of which we find a great deal in old German and contemporary expectations of the future. This is not biblical. In the Bible, heaven is portrayed as a *waiting room*—where a believer may rest

and wait for a time until God's plan is unfolded and until the Lord comes back.

We read this in *Revelation 6*. It is the part of John's vision that occurs after the breaking of the fifth seal (verse 9):

I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. And they cried out with a loud voice: Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and revenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth? And they were each given a white robe and were told to wait a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete who were to be killed as they themselves were killed."

"...to wait a little longer..." So heaven is a waiting room, not the final place where they should be. It is the place where they wait for the final coming of the Lord, the Savior, Jesus Christ, as the judge of the world. In the Bible "judge" means not just the one who punishes, but also the one who establishes justice; so it has this positive content. In Revelation 11:18 we read that he will come to destroy the destroyers of this earth; in Revelation 6:9, the request of the souls who were slain is based on that promise of justice with which they expect to rule the earth. So this verse makes it clear that, when we think of going to heaven, we should not say, "This is where we should be." Heaven is a waiting room, but our final hope

is not heaven. Our final hope is the resurrection of the body and of being eternally in God's presence.

The Resurrection of the Body and the Renewal of Creation

On the tomb of William of Orange, who founded the Dutch state, the following words are written, *expectat resurrectionem*. That means, "he awaits the resurrection;" not "he has gone to heaven." This has been accepted biblical doctrine from apostolic times. This is our hope for the future: forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and eternal life. The resurrection of the flesh, the physical body, is what we are waiting for; and this new body will dwell in a renewed world... "world without end," as the church's creed puts it.

In the Scriptures, a parallel can be seen between a) the expectation and future glory of our body; and b) the renewal of the earth and the future glory of God's creation. Discussion of this future is a speculative, but, I think, biblical activity. What kind of new body can we expect after the resurrection? We do not expect a "brand new" body; that would be reincarnation. Reincarnation would entail my becoming someone else, whereas the Bible teaches that I will continue to be myself. We do not expect reincarnation but we expect resurrection. It means, a renewal of our body. What a hope for those of us who have handicaps or other defects in our bodies.

Jesus' Resurrection Body

We expect a renewal of our bodies, which means continuity and discontinuity. The best example we have of this is the Lord Jesus himself. He has already gone through the process. He has actually been raised and

glorified. In him we see the continuity and the discontinuity. There were moments where people did not recognize him because he was glorified. There was something in his physical being that kept him from being recognized. We see this in the account of the disciples who went along with him on the road to Emmaus. So there is a discontinuity.

But there is also a remarkable continuity. At the end of the day when the disciples were eating with Christ, they asked him to pray, which was usual when guests were present. A Jew prays with his hands raised and eyes opened; so they saw the healed wounds in his hands and recognized him. Later all the disciples recognized him. When they doubted and thought he was a ghost, he said, "Give me fish to eat." So there is a strong continuity here: recognition and admiration. If we need an example of how it will be for each one of us, we can think of Jesus before and after the resurrection. We will be like him (1 John 3:2).

The Bible's Teaching About Heaven

The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* says correctly, "Although some, like Plato, imagine heaven to be a disembodied state where naked minds contemplate the eternal, unchanging ideas, in the Bible this is not so. According to Paul the whole person survives. Even the body is raised again, so that, if it is no longer flesh and blood (1 Corinthians 15:50), it nevertheless has a continuity with the present body, a sameness in form if not in material element (see Matthew 5:29; 10:28; Romans 8:11, 23; 1 Corinthians 15:53). So there is nothing in the Bible (nor in the main creeds of the church) about disembodied spirits in the next world existing in vacua" (p. 500).

We can summarize the biblical teaching about heaven in four points:

1. The Bible teaches that heaven is the place above the earth (the firmament, *Genesis 1:8; Psalms 148:4-6*), and at the same time the place where God lives in majesty (*Deuteronomy 26:15; Psalms 104:2-3; Job 1; Matthew 6:9*).

2. Sometimes heaven is referred to as the place where the Lord is hidden (*Isaiah 64:1; 1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16*). The heavens are the veil behind which the Lord in his incomprehensible greatness withdraws from a sinful world (*Job 22:12; see Colossians 3:3*) until he comes back (*Acts 3:21; 1 Thessalonians 1:10*) and then heaven and earth will be one (*2 Thessalonians 1:7; Revelation 21:2*). This veil will be rent as the veil in the temple was at the time of Christ's death.

3. Our citizenship in heaven will therefore be only *temporary*, that is, as long as Jesus is hidden there; but this limited time will end when Jesus returns to earth (*Philippians 3:20*) because this created world is our final destination. The earth will not go to heaven but just the opposite: the heavens will fill the earth.

4. Sometimes the heavens are referred to as a place where God is preparing all the good he wants to give to his children. The tabernacle had already been prepared in heaven before it was built on the earth (*Exodus 25:9, 40*). The complete architecture of God's plan for the salvation of human history on this earth is already being worked out there (*Psalms 89:2*).

Prefabricated

This makes it possible to understand another passage in the New Testament that seems to speak of there being only a heavenly future,

namely *John 14:1-3*. “Do not be worried and upset,” Jesus told his disciples,

believe in God and believe also in me. There are many rooms in my Father’s house, and I am going to prepare a place for you. I would not tell you this if it were not so. And after I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am.

In the light of what we have just seen in the fourth point above, we can now understand that Jesus was speaking not just about a heavenly future, but, as he himself phrased it, about a work of preparation in heaven. Much work has to be done before the Lord and all the members of his family are ready to live together in this renewed world.

In Holland there are factories where you can buy a prefabricated house. Once you have decided to have one, they can come and build it on your property, sometimes in as little as one day. In a similar way, the Lord will prepare all the rooms and houses of his kingdom, with all that belongs to it, in heaven—and then he will come back and have it ready in one day, so that finally we will all be where he is (*John 14:3*).

If this explanation is true it helps us to understand why, in the same chapter, the movement is in exactly the opposite direction, that is from heaven to earth. Jesus says, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teachings. My father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (vs. 23). Even *2 Corinthians 5* would fit into this picture. There Paul speaks about a glorified body which, at that moment, was

already waiting for him in heaven, one that he wanted to assume so that his mortal body would be swallowed up by life (5:1, 2).

At this moment, all our hope is in Christ, in what he possesses already (a glorified body), and in what he has prepared for us: a new existence which will be a renewal of our present mortal bodies. Paul expresses a deep longing for that new life. God has it in store for us in heaven but still we all eagerly and with great longing await it at the day of his coming (Romans 8:23). On that day we will experience a redemption, not away from our bodies, but a redemption in which our bodies too will participate.

Chapter 7: Consummation — *Matthew 24*

We have explained how there is a hopeful future for a world that is to be reborn. Quite logically we can expect the question: when will this new birth take place? How does it fit in with all the other events that have been foretold in the Scriptures?

In the books of dispensationalists like Hal Lindsay (*The Late Great Planet Earth*), we receive a complete scenario of how things will happen. Those who think in Hal Lindsay's line would answer, "Yes, we believe in a time of renewal of the earth, the time of refreshment (Acts 3:20, 21), but that will all take place after the great tribulation in the millennium. This will be a final period in human history, but it will end with the predicted fire of 2 Peter 3 and then this world will perish. This last destruction will take place on the Day of the Lord, when he will appear as the judge of the world."

At the end of the last chapter, however, we stated that the predicted renewal would take place at the day of the Lord's coming. And indeed the Scriptures do not promise us just a temporary relief for the future of the earth. The promise of a future renewal is much more permanent than just a period or a millennium; it is a promise for all eternity. The book of Revelation ends with this perspective of a new heaven and a new earth for ever and ever (*Revelation 21, 22*). Therefore, even if we believe that there will be a "time of refreshment," or a millennium (see the next chapter), what we are discussing in this book is much more than that.

Whenever I talk about these things, people come up with the question: but didn't Jesus himself talk about this final day of his coming as "the end of the world?" In the Gospel of Matthew this is one of the expressions that Jesus used when he discussed the end time. Let us study these words. If we follow the King James translation we discover that this expression is used three times:

1. In the parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13:39, Jesus speaks of "the end of the world" as a time of the harvest when the Son of Man will send out his laborers to burn the weeds and to harvest the wheat.

2. In the discussion with the disciples in Matthew 24:3 on the same question, we read: "Lord tell us, when will this be and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the world?"

3. In the last verse of the Gospel of Matthew we read, after Jesus' final command, his last promise: "And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

Three times here we read the expression: "the end of the world," and in the teaching of Jesus it is identical with the last judgment day (Matthew

13) and with his second coming (Matthew 28). His disciples put it all in one row: “When will this be,” namely the destruction of the temple (Matthew 24:2) and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the world?

Instructed by Daniel the disciples expected all these events on one day and they asked Jesus, “when will this be?”

The answer of Jesus is remarkable: “No one knows, not the angels, not even the Son of Man, only the Father knows” (Matthew 24:36). Nevertheless Jesus tells us a lot about this “end of the world” and connects this teaching with the parable in Matthew 13 when he says: “at that day when the sign of the Son of Man appears in the sky, then the Son of Man shall be seen by all nations coming down from heaven in great glory and he will send his angels with a great sound of the trumpet. That will be the day of the Lord.” He never mentions two days or two comings. It will be *one* day when he will come back to this earth and that will be the final day.

How can we still believe in the renewal of this world when Jesus uses the expression *the end of the world*? Many Christians have believed in the destruction of the world on the basis of the phrase Jesus uses “even unto the end of the world.”

Here we are faced with incorrect translations. If we read other translations we can quickly discover that this expression in the King James translation is very questionable. The normal Greek word for “world” is *kosmos* (see John 3:16) or *gè* (see 2 Peter 3:10). But Jesus uses neither of them: here he uses the word *aion*. The correct translation of this word is “age.” Jesus was not speaking about the end of the world, but about the end of the history of fallen man—‘aion’ could even be translated “period”

or “economy” or “administration.” *This age* is passing by. *At the end of this age* the Lord Jesus will come back and reap the harvest and begin the “new age.” It is the step from time into eternity.

This leads me to an explanation of the first word of this expression, namely *end* of the world. The word in Greek here is *sunteleia*. In the middle of this word is the word *telos* which does not just mean “end” but also “destiny.” Together with the little proposition *sun*, the word “end of the age” does not mean the “end” as a finish, but the “end” as a fulfillment of a period. Therefore, I prefer to translate the word *sunteleia* by the old-fashioned English word “consummation.” That word connotes the element of “fulfillment;” it does not merely express the end—the “final stop”—of things, but rather the completion of a goal, a desired end.

This leads us on to a broader understanding of Jesus’ teaching involving the meaning (significance) of this “consummation,” its marvel and its “timing.”

1. The Meaning of this Consummation

It is very important to choose the proper word in this context. When we hear about the *end* of a given thing, we conclude that this word indicates the sudden cessation of existence. A thing was there before, but now it isn’t there any longer. When the axle of my bike is broken, that is the *end* of my bike’s existence as a bike. When my car runs out of petrol, that fact puts an end to our day of outing. In a similar way people have (mis)understood Jesus’ words about the end of the world. They have understood this in a way similar to a breakdown of its mechanism putting an end to its existence. This perspective, however, is not biblical. God remains faithful to his own creation. He has made a plan to save it, to

restore it. It is amazing to see how many times we read the word “new” in the Bible; God is doing new things. He restores, renews, re-creates.

He does not give up a world that has been corrupted by sin. He is in fact restoring it to its original destiny. At the moment of redemption a prisoner will again enjoy the freedom he once had. In the process of reconciliation, estranged parties are restored to that first joy they felt in their fellowship. In the process of restoration the original condition of creation is experienced anew. All these aspects are implied in this Greek word *sunteleia*. This does not connote the very cessation of things but on the contrary the fulfillment of its original goal, its destiny.

To give one more example: one situation should not be compared with the circumstances of the crew of a medieval ship; these people lived in constant fear that their journey might suddenly *end*. In their view of things this earth was flat and if one came too close to its edge, that person might just fall off! The biblical view of the *end* is to be compared with the travels of a pilgrim (we find one in Psalm 84) who at the end of his journey reaches his long-desired goal. Now his deepest expectations will be fulfilled. This is the biblical view of the ultimate future of mankind. This will not signify a break-down but a break-through! The word *sunteleia* of the *aión* contains within itself all the aspects of fulfillment, when we ourselves had come to think that our lives were to remain unfulfilled. It will mean a completion and fruition of hitherto unfinished programs; pieces of the tapestry that looked only fragments to us are now joined together. This will also be an hour of judgment. In this judgment the ones that from our viewpoint were the last will turn out to be the first, and the first will appear to be the last. All those who did not want to accept God’s salvation will be judged and those who have trusted in Christ will be carried safely through

the fire. But not only we ourselves, but also the works we have done in this world—our art and architecture, our gardens and cities, will follow us (1 Corinthians 3:12-15; Revelation 14:13). If we realize this, we might be helped to understand that the world is not coming to a miserable close, but rather that there is a destiny full of hope for this world of ours. Time is about to be consummated; God's promises are going to be fulfilled. The end of the age is not the end of the world, but the fulfillment of God's promises concerning the world.

2. The Marvel of this Consummation

The marvel of this consummation is revealed to us in two images that Jesus uses to explain it. The first picture can be found in the parable of the weeds in Matthew 13:24-30 and 37-43. In this instance he compares the secret, invisible background of human history with the experiences of a farmer who sowed good seed in his field. But what happened? Jesus must have told them a story that had a familiar ring in a farming community—his neighbor and enemy came, sowed weeds among the good seed. That is the situation we live in: good seed is growing next to weeds. Our age is characterized by this situation: both are growing together and if we were to pull up the weeds before the actual time has come, we would certainly cause harm to the good seed. There are two elements that we should note really well in this picture of the end of the age.

(1) It must be preceded by a process in which both the good wheat and the weeds grow together. Human history is important. Both rebellion, lawlessness, dark powers on the one hand *and* trust, obedience, divinely inspired plants on the other hand must be allowed to come to fruition.

(2) The gathering of the good wheat in sheaves is done at the command of the Lord of the field. He will use this harvest in the kingdom He is building. His purposes have been carried out, there is completion now. The images of his final act of consummation are always joyful, in the end, whether we read of a harvest-feast or a marriage-feast. There will be painful aspects for those who consciously chose the wrong side and joined with the Enemy. Nevertheless, this never darkens the joy of those who are found in Christ. It is a relief. We are no longer threatened with death and destruction by the “sons of the evil one.” This same dual aspect is also found in the second image that Jesus employs for his description of the end of the age. According to Matthew 24:8, the end can also be compared with a woman feeling the pangs of childbirth. Wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes are like the beginning of birth pains (Matthew 24:4-8). So there is pain, and there will be pain; the pains however are not the convulsions of an earth in agony, they are the birth pains that precede and actually cause the birth of a new creation. That is reason for great joy.

3. The Timing of this Consummation

If God has indeed promised a great future for this world, we have every right to ask with the disciples, “When will all these things take place?” The first answer was: on the day of his coming. I refer here to *Matthew 23:37-39*—Jesus addresses Jerusalem, “How often have I longed to gather you children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate.” This is a word of judgment, but Jesus immediately adds another element to his message of judgment, and that is a very joyful promise, “For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say: ‘Blessed is he who comes in the

name of the Lord” (verse 39). Here he refers to his return. In fact the Lord Jesus never speaks about his “return” but always about his *parousia*, his “coming.” This word *parousia* was at that time a well known word expressing the entry of a newly crowned king into cities that were under his dominion; he was welcomed there as the new ruler. Jesus promised that after the times of judgment that were to afflict Jerusalem (which took place in 70 A.D.), he would come back and appear as King of the world. When he had announced this his disciples curiously asked: “Tell us Lord, when will this be?” Then the Lord Jesus gives an answer that can be understood only if we know something of the contents of the book of Daniel.

Daniel is the only prophet who uses the expression “end time” or “the time of the end” (cf. 11:35, 40; 12:4, 9). This expression is similar to Jesus’ words *sunteleia tou aionos*. In the Greek version of the text of Daniel there is the phrase *sunteleia tou kairou*. *Kairos* and *aioon* both indicate “age.”

Throughout the 24th chapter of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus connects his teaching with Daniel’s prophecy (cf. *Matthew 24:6* and *Daniel 2:28*; *Matthew 24:10* and *Daniel 11:10, 41*; *Matthew 24:15* and *Daniel 12:11, 11:31*; *Matthew 24:21* and *Daniel 12:1*). When one compares these chapters closely it appears without question that *Daniel 11* and *12* were in Jesus’ mind when he answered his disciples’ questions. What is he saying? Briefly stated it is this: What Daniel had foretold as a future event, the end time, is from now on present reality. Daniel prophesied that the “end time” that is to come will be characterized by a great tribulation (12:1). Jesus tells his disciples: this is starting right now. From now on you should expect these “signs of the time” (as they have been called) to take place.

In the book of Daniel and in other Jewish “apocalyptic writings” this specific concept of “the end times” is taken to refer to the period that precedes the coming of the Messiah. This period was to be characterized (and thus also recognized) by signs like wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, rebellion against God and the rise of an anti-messiah, plus times of intense tribulation.

The dispensationalist understanding of the book of *Daniel* has “baptized” this Jewish outlook by stating: these events are still to be expected in the future. However, when we read Jesus’ answer to his disciples’ question in *Matthew 24*, he is in fact saying: from now on the end time has come. Be on your guard; from now on wars and rumors of wars will be found, famines and earthquakes will take place, but this is not yet the end. First the Gospel must be preached to all nations. Judgment will come over Jerusalem and Daniel’s words will come true; and then the sign of the *parousia* will be manifested for all the nations to see. And then the Son of Man will send out his angels to reap the harvest (24:31). And when *that* day will be, “no one knows about the day or that hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (24:36). That is the secret of the Father alone.

The end time in this view is the entire period between Christ’s first coming and his second coming.

This ties in quite well with Paul’s teaching when he speaks about “us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:11). The apostle John says in his first epistle, “Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour” (2:18). The apostle Peter wrote: “the end of all things is near” (1 Peter 4:7). They all

understood the teaching of Jesus in this way, that the period between Jesus' first and his second coming *is* the end time that was foretold by Daniel.

The church of Christ should therefore not wait for "the end time" to appear, as though this is a period that is still to come. No, the time when Christ is drawing all things to himself is already here. In our time we can observe the mystery of lawlessness; it is already at work (2 Thessalonians 2:7). There were antichrists in the past and we have antichrists at present among us (1 John 2:18). At present everything bears the mark of heavy pressure on believers to give up their faith or to follow secular "Christs" that promise a better world. Similarly we see the appearance of the "man of lawlessness," with pretended signs and wonders today!

But let us go back to the question: When will this final consummation of our age take place? The New Testament answers that this event may take place at any given moment. "Be ready," "let no one deceive you," "do not be troubled" by all these things that may befall you. Be prepared to receive your king. That is Jesus' message also to us.

This brings me then to a personal question, addressed to each reader who has come to this point of my book. How do *you* think you are prepared right now? Do you think that you will be adequately prepared in having the right eschatological views?

Jesus himself replies to his disciples' question with a searching question, put to each one of them: "Who then is the faithful and wise servant...?" Is that the person who is busy figuring out the blueprint of Christ's second coming, so that he knows that this is going to happen 1,260 days from now, or after so many years? No, the wise servant is the one who, knowing that the Lord may come *any moment* uses his

responsibility properly. “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns” (Matthew 24:45, 46). How do we use the things that the Lord has entrusted to us? That will be the question put to us by the Lord on His return.

This is a call for good stewardship and social responsibility! How responsible were you in relationships with your fellow creatures who are poor, downtrodden or discriminated against? On purpose I stated this in very general terms; God has entrusted us with the care for all our fellow creatures—old people, poor people, unborn people—including also the care for the animals that fill air, sea or dry land (Genesis 1:28). How miserably we have often treated them, when we think of the species of animals and plants that are doomed to extinction.

The joyful message that the day of the great consummation is at hand therefore also constitutes an appeal to *us*: show forth the fruits of conversion! You may think, “What can I do regarding pollution or poverty or loss of humanity all over the world?” (Matthew 14:17). What you’ve got will definitely be far too little to heal the whole world. That, however, is not our business. We should be concerned with that which is our responsibility. The church of Christ is meant to be a creative community that—on an admittedly small scale—shows forth real care, real “humanness,” genuine involvement in political justice and recognizable stewardship concerning the world. For that purpose the Spirit was poured out on us; he will enable (empower) us to show forth the first fruits of the coming Kingdom.

Chapter 8: The Millennium — Revelation 20

When Jesus speaks about the end of the age as the final consummation of history, and when we believe that this will be the moment of renewal of the earth, as promised in Romans 8, there is the understandable question: what about the Millennium? Does this moment mark the beginning of the Millennium? What is the Millennium, as a matter of fact?

In *Revelation* chapter 20, we read that at the end of the age the devil will be bound for a thousand years. This period of a thousand years is indicated by the word “Millennium.” Only in Revelation chapter 20 is a Millennium spoken of in a literal sense. How does the promise of this vision relate to the subject of his book, the renewal of the earth and all creatures that live on it?

There are few passages in the Scriptures that have been interpreted in so many—often contradictory—ways as this particular chapter in the book of Revelation. There are many Christians who believe that we should read this chapter about the Millennium as the period of history when the nations were being baptized and Christianity was strong. Most Reformed Christians who still stand in this tradition believe that *this* period of “Christianization” has now gone by. This interpretation is called “amillennialist.” The Millennium is now non-existent. (The Greek prefix “a” means “non-.”)

Another way to read Revelation chapter 20 is to take this as a promise to be fulfilled in the future, when Jesus returns. Christians who believe this project many promises onto this future “golden age.” People who hold this

theological position are called “premillennialists.” (The prefix “pre” means “before;” Jesus will come back *before* the Millennium begins.)

A third way to understand this chapter is to view it as a future period in human history that will precede Christ’s return. This interpretation tends to view the Millennium as akin to a time of awakening and revival that will renew the nations and will end in a final climax, when Jesus comes back. This interpretation is labeled “postmillennialist” (from “post,” which means “after;” Jesus comes back *after* the Millennium).

How to Read Prophecy?

First, a brief comment on the way we should interpret prophecy and visions.

A huge part of the Bible comes to us in the form of a prophecy. In fact, the apostle Peter once called the whole Scripture a prophecy (2 Peter 1:20). The Bible is called prophetic because its purpose is to give “background”—information about how God was and is involved in the events of human history. That in secular history books would be described horizontally. A prophecy has the function of an x-ray photo.

Sometimes prophecy speaks about the past (*Isaiah 1; Ezekiel 20; Revelation 12*), sometimes about the present (*Isaiah 5; Revelation 5*), and sometimes about the future (*Isaiah 2; Matthew 24; Revelation 20*).

When prophecy speaks about the future it has the same function as when it speaks about the past, namely to open our eyes to see how God is involved in future historic events. The purpose is not to satisfy our curiosity or to give us a blueprint about what is going to happen. No, the purpose is that we will recognize the Lord’s work, when it takes place.

“From now on I tell you of new things, of hidden things unknown to you,” says the Lord (*Isaiah 48:5*). Why does the Lord reveal these things,

before they take place? The answer is: so that you may know at the moment that it takes place, that it is I who am doing it (48:6). The prophet is not a fortune-teller or a holy crystal ball-gazer. His word should function as a beacon in the turbulent swell of future events, shedding light on historic developments at the time they take place.

In John White's novel, *The Tower of Geburah*, one of the main figures (Lisa) receives a special stone (the blue Mashal-stone) that she must use in time of need by hanging it around her neck. It then has the power "to bring hidden things to light." Prophecy is meant to have such a powerful effect. Once we "hang it around our neck" we see the hidden background of human history.

The Example of Mary

In the Gospel of Luke we read that Mary received prophetic words, and each time she "treasured up all things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). I am sure she did not grasp the full significance of old Simeon's prophecy when he said, "and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:35).

But that prophecy was not meant to be fortune-telling. It was meant as a profoundly illuminating and encouraging prophecy, which at the moment it came to pass was to be of great comfort for Mary. Then she would know: "it hurts, but I know on the basis of this prophecy that it is a part of the plan of God!"

If prophecy is to have that effect, we must not turn such utterances into some kind of "scenario," even though we believers are sure that they refer to real historical events. No, we should treasure these words and

ponder them in our hearts... and when they take place, we will recognize them and say with awe: "it is the Lord's doing."

Another complication when we deal with prophecy, is that it is not the same thing as prediction. When a prediction has come true, it is finished, but prophecy finds more than one fulfillment. A good example is John 19:37, where the prophecy of Zechariah 12:10 is quoted: "They will look on me, the one they have pierced." Revelation 1:7, however, teaches us that this particular prophecy has a dimension that is still unfulfilled. The final fulfillment will be found, when Jesus returns, in full view of all the nations.

This insight helps us to be careful when we notice different interpretations of prophetic sections of Scripture. We should not play off one interpretation against the other. It is possible that all of them are correct, in a way similar to John 19:37 and Revelation 1:7, both being true fulfillments of Zechariah 12:10. It is my impression that the same situation applies to the prophecies concerning the Millennium.

How to Interpret Visions

Not all prophecy is conveyed to us in oral descriptions. Many prophecies are given through visions. This is true for the larger part of the book of Revelation. Revelation chapter 20 also is a vision; compare the well-known expression in this book, "and I saw...", which describes a vision (cf. 1:10, 11). A vision is not a description of future facts in the same way as chronicles describe past events. When we read that "the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree, when shaken by a strong wind" (6:13) or about horses whose heads "resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulphur" (9:17), the reader

who takes this to be a photographic record of visible reality is mistaken. Future events are here foretold in a symbolic fashion. We can sometimes understand the symbolism; the number 1000, for instance, is 10 times 10 times 10, so 10^3 , which has a notion of the divine trinity, connected with the number ten, which always indicates completeness. A thousand-year-period thus is a complete and divine period, as contrasted to the truncated period of the Antichrist, which is time and again symbolized by the number $3\frac{1}{2}$ (half of the number seven).

When interpreting visions, we should not apply the rules of historiography but the rules of dream-interpretation. In a dream, a small detail can assume great significance, like the unexpected color, the strange noise, etc. Not all these details have significance, however. The way to find out about this is to ask oneself afterwards: what sort of feeling arose within me when I saw this? Virtually always the meaning of the dream is revealed as soon as the feeling (emotion) that was expressed in that particular symbol is unveiled. The main principle of interpretation is one of association. We should thus interpret John's vision by asking ourselves: what associations did these images yield?. They might arouse a feeling of awe, hope, despair or anger.

Revelation: God's Clock

We should come back now to the interpretation of Revelation chapter 20. When we study this passage within its context, we notice that it has a place in a series of passages that are introduced with the phrase: "and I saw...." This series of visions begins with chapter 19 verse 11: "I saw heaven standing open...." That reminds us of the beginning of the book, because the very first vision is also introduced with: "After this I looked and

there before me was a door standing open in heaven” (4:1). But now John watches and a flow of visions reveal themselves to his eyes: each vision is introduced with the words “and I saw...” (cf. 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 11; 21:1—seven visions in all).

This leads me to my first discovery: the vision dealing with the Millennium is not there on its own, but is part of a series of seven visions that begins with portraying the conqueror on his white horse (19:11, cf. 6:2). The seven visions together describe the Final Day of the Lord. It is the moment Jesus himself has portrayed in the parable of the weeds among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30). This is the day of the *harvest*. If this is true, all the preceding chapters (Revelation 5:1-19:11) should be taken as a description of the process of *ripening* that precedes the day of the harvest. This ripening process has been described in the form (pattern) of a cyclical series of events, symbolized by the three times seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowls; each series describes a similar series of events, all of them covering the complete period of ripening, and each series of seven portrays the events that are described in a more cataclysmic way than the preceding series. These cycles should be visualized as a spiral; or, to take another image, the big finger of a clock. Every time the seventh seal/trumpet/bowl is seen, it looks as though this really is the end, as though the big finger touches the number 12 on the dial; yet it then proceeds, because the little finger apparently has not yet struck the decisive hour. Another hour appears on God’s clock... This pattern continues up to chapter 19 verse 11, when a new series of events describes the final day of the harvest. Now indeed the clock has struck the decisive hour, the little finger points to the number 12 on the dial!

The Day of the Lord

As a part of this “day of the Lord” we read in chapter 20 about the coming of an interval (an intermediate period of time). We suddenly realize that we had thoughts about the Day of the Lord’s coming that appear to be far too simplistic, as though the entire process of judgment and healing was to take place in a period of one minute or a literal 24 hours. When he comes back, the Day of the Lord turns out to be a worldwide, breathtaking, “time-consuming” and very complicated process. What else are we to expect, for he won’t just burn or destroy the world, but he will in fact heal and renew and transform the world with all the nations? At the end of the book of Revelation the validity of this view is confirmed in the particular description of the Day of the Lord. If we are to rescue passengers from a sinking ship, that takes only minutes. If, however, we wish to rescue the entire vessel, that takes considerably more time.

It is a great marvel to read in Revelation chapter 20 that it will take the Lord a long time in order to transform the history of all the nations of the earth. This is the way for us to read chapter 20. The Lord will take a full period of time (10 x 10 x 10) to realize his promises. In Revelation 20 we read two things:

A. The Devil Chained

In his vision John saw an angel coming down out of heaven: “He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years” (verses 1 and 2). There is great emphasis on this act of chaining the devil. Satan was thrown into the abyss, locked and sealed in it, “to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore” (vs. 3).

Indeed, this vision arouses within us a sense of tremendous relief. We suddenly realize how intensely all nations are being deceived by God's enemy. He was the hidden energy behind all their wars and massacres. False religions, idols and idol worship have caused a torrent of suffering and evil throughout the centuries. No, not even St. Augustine can persuade me that there has ever been a period when the devil was chained (cf. I Peter 5:8). Revelation 20 tells us that, as part of God's final day of bringing in the harvest, there will be a period of healing for all nations. God does not regard the history of the nations of the earth as though the only significance of that history is to yield individual believers. Quite the contrary, their history and culture, with all that it has ever produced, will be subjected to a liberating process, prior to the final judgment and the moment of glorification. That is the way we should read the vision about the Millennium.

B. The Last Will Be First

Together with the chaining of the devil, we read how the martyrs will be raised from the dead and put on thrones. It is very hard to picture this part of the vision. How will this take place in history? Martyrs will be raised from the dead in a first resurrection. Is this an elite? Will "ordinary" believers follow later on? Is this a physical "quickenings" or will it be in the spirit realm? Will it take place on earth or in heaven?

One thing is certain: they will reign with Christ as kings. That should be emphasized. Here is the feeling. Think of the rule we should apply when we deal with the interpretation of visions. The feeling here is one of complete astonishment. Those who were downtrodden are here made kings. Those who in the eyes of the world were negligible turn out to be the true

inheritors. Those who were despised are recipients of high honors. Suddenly, the last appear to be first. The authority to judge is given to them. The Old Testament judges were not dispensers of punishment, as we understand the function of our present day judges. Rather, they were the ones that saved Israel from its enemies. First of all the emphasis should be on their restorative work. A genuine judge does indeed punish the evildoer, but he also attempts to heal the broken relationships and remove all evil, effective of the deed that has been perpetrated.

When we come back to this vision and realize that the Millennium should be seen as an intense period of healing, we should at least pose a great number of questions: It is going to be part of the Day of the Lord, but how long is it going to take? These thousand years are certainly to be regarded as symbolic: the period stands for a time which will be perfect for the Triune God to do his work of finally leading the nations out of their deep hurts, which have been inflicted in the time of Satan's domination. The period does *not* refer to the new earth that has been promised. It does not yet signify the complete salvation or the Kingdom of God. That will appear after this period. At the end Satan will receive one final but desperate opportunity to come back on the scene. He will be beaten. The final judgment will take place and the new heaven and the new earth will appear (21:1). It is important to note that that will be time when *all* God's promises will be fulfilled; all promises concerning the Kingdom of Peace and Justice will come true. I have a Greek New Testament where all sorts of references to other verses have been printed in the margin. It is revealing to note how few references from the writings of the prophets and the apostles have been printed in the margin next to the text of Revelation 20, dealing with the Millennium. But in the margin of chapter 21 there is

an “outpouring” of references to virtually all Old Testament prophets: Isaiah 25, 35, 40, 55 and 65; Ezekiel 37; Zechariah 14, etc. All of these utterances will be fulfilled in the world to come, where heaven and earth will be one. When will this renewal of the earth take place? Are all promises in the Bible concerning the glorious future only referring to this Millennium?

We saw that the answer to that last question is “no.” The Millennium may be viewed as a preliminary fulfillment, depicted as a most necessary healing operation, which arouses within us a feeling of relief and astonishment.

The Day of the Lord should certainly not be waited for in an atmosphere of mere fear and trembling. The term refers to a completed period which will prepare the way for the final and decisive coming of God’s Kingdom. The Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper offered the same explanation and was of the opinion that it could never take up a long time in history. [He viewed it as a mere matter of days. See Abraham Kuyper, *Van de Voleinding*, Vol. IV, p. 349.] It is an interval. The final fulfillment (consummation) will be found when the new earth is established, once it has gone through this deep process of judgment. The “old” heaven and the “old” earth (to the extent that they had been under the curse, cf. Genesis 3:17) fled from God’s presence and were seen no more. This expresses the intensity with which God’s judgment is going to annihilate everything polluted by sin. But how staggering is the outcome! Not a brand-new (*neos*) world, but a *renewed* one (*kainos*). All the nations and their culture find a place on it (21:16), when they have been purified (21:27). A renewed nature will be there (22:1, 2) this time bearing fruit *twelve* times a year (22:2)! The revealed content of Revelation chapter 21 and 22 should

provide an answer to the longstanding discussion whether the earth is going to be annihilated or transformed. Transformation will take place, as *far as the curse is found*. So I end this chapter with the well known words of Isaac Watts:

Joy to the world! The Lord is come...
No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground.
He comes to make his blessings flow,
far as the curse is found.

The transformation will give birth to a world as it has been in God's mind from the beginning of creation.

Chapter 9: Glorification — Revelation 21

The last and final vision of John is a vision in which he saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, *coming down* out of heaven from God, prepared and ready like a bride dressed to meet her husband (21:2).

I have emphasized: *coming down*. One theme of this book is a question: "Is heaven our future?" Here we finally read the answer to this question. John saw in this vision how at the very end of history, after the final judgment, the heavenly city came down. The last dwelling place of the Lord and his bride, the whole body of believers is the earth. When John saw this happen in his vision, he heard a loud voice speaking from the

throne: “Now God’s home is with mankind, he will live with them and they shall be his people” (3). When we ask how that will be, we receive a very clear answer as far as what will not be: no sin, no death and brokenness; it will all be taken away from the earth. No more grief, no more pain. The Lord himself will comfort us like a mother her young: “He will wipe away all tears from our eyes; the old things have disappeared” (4).

When, however, we ask positively how the world will look when the curse is removed, we do not get an answer in the form of a description. No, a stream of symbolic images about a crystal glass city, golden streets and pearl gates remind us of the fact that we are not in a position to understand fully what a glorified world means. What does it mean that we will be glorified and that even the whole earth will be filled with God’s glory (*Romans 8:30; Numbers 14:21; Revelation 21:11*)? This final chapter will address this question.

The Meaning of the Word ‘Glory’

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for ‘glory’ (*kabod*) means literally: weight. Even today there are countries in Africa and in the East where a man with weight is also a man with power and dignity. This was true in old times, so that “weight” became a synonym for dignity, wealth and supreme authority. Jacob was this kind of a man, “because he took everything that was his father’s and changed it into glory” (*Genesis 31:1*). This meant wealth, property and power.

The word “glory” was used especially for kings. We read in Matthew 6:29 about Solomon “in all his glory.” The word is used of kings to refer to their high authority, their supreme dignity and everything that constitutes

the greatness of a king, like beautiful buildings and royal palaces (cf. Matthew 4:8).

The Glory of God

This is the reason why the word “glory” has become the most used description of the reality of God. It is sometimes almost identical with the Lord himself. When Moses asked, “May I see your glory?” (Exodus 33:18), he asked whether he could see the Lord himself. When the Lord appears, his glory appears (Psalm 102:16, 17; Haggai 2:2, 4; Exodus 1:28). In this way the Bible teaches us that the appearance of the Lord God of Israel is a royal appearance, in majesty and authority: here is the Maker and Owner of the Universe. At the same time the glory of the Lord is a reality that shines through all his works. It is visible here and now in all the things God has made. They express his character (Psalm 145). Here we see again how the Bible teaches that God is both immanent and transcendent (see ch. 1). His glory is spread over all his works and at the same time there is a hidden glory, which is hidden with God. This is because the Lord has withdrawn himself from his creation, when man rebelled against Him.

The Glory of Man

In the Old Testament we read that God has given glory to man (Psalm 8:5). This is explained in the next sentence: “Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands.” Here we see, again, that glory means authority and majesty, with all that belongs to it, like ownership and beauty, wealth and authority. Again we are struck by the fact that this glory of man is no heavenly glory; it is related to the earth and man’s place among the creatures (Genesis 1:28). It must become manifest in the way

he will build a culture and manage the earth. It should reflect the glory of God, his Father, who is the only true Owner and Maker. This is the meaning of the biblical expression, that man is created in the image of God.

Man-Centered

When man rebelled against God, he did not completely lose his glory. In a rebel you can still admire the genius of his leadership and capacities. Only it developed a man-centered direction; and we know now how much this has damaged the creation. What he did lose, however, was the purity and holiness of God. The New Testament comes with really good news, when it teaches, that man will be renewed! Through faith in the Lord Jesus and by walking in Him we will be changed into glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). This has a present and a future aspect. Here and now we will receive a new way of relating to people and a new way of ruling nature, this time with the obedience and love of Christ. The final renewal to glory is a future promise (Romans 8:18).

A Glorious Future

When we talk about a glorious future we speak biblical language. Indeed, Paul teaches us that we will be glorified: “Those he justified, he also glorified” (Romans 8:30). This glorification never means a loss of creation. Quite the opposite. The creation was originally glorious as Psalm 8 says. God’s glory—in the meaning of this royal majesty and rich creativity was visible in all his works (Psalm 145:10, 11). Man was originally a reflection of this glory (Genesis 1:28). When sin entered the world not much of this glory remained. Man lost dominion and became subject to

death with nature as his enemy and God did not any longer dwell among his people like he did in the garden of Eden.

A restoration to glory therefore never meant a separation from the earth and participation in a heavenly life. He meant a restoration of God's original plan. Man is renewed to the image of God through faith in Christ. This is expressed in terms of a reinstallation into his office as God's governor over this world. Real glory means in the Scriptures always to have royal dominion with all that belongs to it. So there is glorification already here and now (2 Corinthians 3:18). But the final glorification is still waiting for us when Christ comes back (Romans 8:30). At that moment the whole of creation will participate in the regeneration. This will be such a joyful event that even all our sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us (Romans 8:18).

Jesus as the Risen Lord is Our Example

When Jesus was glorified, he was not someone completely different. People recognized him (Luke 24:31; John 21:7), but at the same time he no longer participated in time and space like all other earthly creatures. He was able to enter a room when the doors were locked (John 20:19), and there were moments when his own disciples did not recognize him (John 21:3). This was caused by the fact that there was a solemnity, a dignity, an "other-worldliness" that impressed the disciples so much that they hardly dared to ask him who he was, although at the same time they knew it was the Lord (John 21:12).

I cannot define it in any other terms than to say that he shared in the greatness and the majesty of God who is superior to his creation and its laws. He is beyond time and space. Can we imagine what that means? The normal three-dimensional reality was embraced by the multi-dimensional

reality of God's glory. This had happened to Jesus once before, on the mountain of transfiguration. It gave Peter and the other apostles so deep a joy that they wanted to stay, but they were also afraid (Matthew 17:4). The Scriptures teach us that the same awe and joy were there after the resurrection of Christ (Luke 24:37). It was awe-inspiring.

I like to speculate about glorification in terms of natural science. Let us imagine that our three-dimensional world will receive a fourth or maybe even a fifth or sixth or seventh dimension. In that case our three-dimensional world will be fully present within the multi-dimensional world as two dimensions are fully present within a three-dimensional world. The continuity is guaranteed just as the three-dimensional body of Christ was fully present within the glorified body by which he appeared to his disciples. He even ate fish before their eyes (Luke 24:43). At the same time he was very different (cf. C. S. Lewis *Mere Christianity*, p. 141).

Glorification of the Church

The step from Jesus' risen body to the body of the believers, his bride, is not a big one. Here we will see the same kind of transformation. In Revelation 21, John is invited to come and see the now glorified body of Christ: "Come and I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." John tells how the Spirit took control over him, "...and the angel carried me to the top of a very high mountain. He showed me Jerusalem, the Holy City, coming down out of heaven from God *and shining with the glory of God*" (emphasis added).

The effect of God's glory on this new Jerusalem is that it does not show forth brick-stones, but gems; the gates and foundation-stones all speak the language of God's faithfulness. Under heavy pressure gems

grow out of stones! The city was perfectly square as a symbol of balanced harmony that is characteristic for peace, shalom. Transparent stones and precious gold teach us: it is wealthy beyond our imagination. It cannot be expressed in worldly language, it is completely out of this world.

Nevertheless it contains all the aspects of what is real and beautiful here. We read about the twelve tribes of the people of Israel and the twelve apostles and we read of the kings of all nations that bring their wealth into it. "The greatness and wealth of all nations will be brought into this city. But nothing that is impure will enter the city nor anyone who does shameful things or tells lies (21:24-27). One should not read these verses as if pagan nations will continue to exist, bringing tribute into the new Jerusalem. No, it means that the final result of all the cultures that have been on the earth will be present in the new Jerusalem, cleansed and purified by the blood of the Lamb. Also, the church will be presented spotless and without blemish.

Glorification of the World

When we read on in chapter 22, we see the earth with its rivers and fruit trees. First John sees only the bride of Christ, the new Jerusalem (vs.9), then his sight increases: he sees all redeemed kings and nations of the earth in this heavenly city which has come down to the earth (vs. 24-27). Finally we read of rivers and fruit trees. The garden of Eden returns. The water of life *sparkling* like crystal reminds us of the Pison and Gihon (Genesis 2:11-13). These names mean "sparkling" and "spraying." The tree of life also returns, this time not one but many and on both sides of the river. It seems as if every tree has become a tree of life. The vision

shows an example of nature: these glorified trees do not only bear fruit, but also produce leaves with healing power.

Again we must realize that this is a vision and that its language is symbolic. Though these symbols have meaning, they express the inexplicable, the glorification of nature and the total healing of all nations. For our minds this is not comprehensible: many things seem irreversible, the extinction of various species of animals, the destruction of nature and the horrible result of so many wars and injustices which have wounded the nations. Here the Lord promises us total healing. Even the deepest hurts will be taken away. Imagine what this means for victims of Stalin and Hitler. If the wounds of all nations will be healed, it gives hope for those innumerable people who were sacrificed on the altars of cruel dictators in totalitarian systems!

Epilogue

Finally: What is our calling when we expect this future? The thesis of this book is that our future hope is a foundation underneath all our actions. Preaching the gospel is our first calling, because the children of Adam must be brought back into a new relationship with God, as their creator and redeemer through Christ. This includes, secondly, a calling to have dominion over the earth and to be stewards over all that the Lord has given us. Thirdly, in the midst of social injustice Christians must stand up and speak out. The view of this book on the future of this world as God's creation will not be without consequences for our behavior. It does make a difference whether we believe that there will be a complete break and total *discontinuity* or that God will build a new city there, with stones that have been baked here, so that there will also be continuity. It does make a

difference whether we believe in a new dispensation that will lead us away from the earth in a future heavenly life, or in the unity of God's saving plan and that there is, in each period within the different times of God's covenant with His people, one and the same desire on God's heart that His creation would finally be restored, and glorified.

A good businessman will not invest his money in the production of an article that will be out of fashion in a short time. But he is willing to invest all his money and energy in an article that will be an essential product in the future world market. How much more should we as Christians invest all our money and effort in activities that are a foreshadowing of the coming Kingdom. It is a very good investment to support a pro-life group, to be of help to movements that speak out against apartheid and against the caste-system. It is important to build bridges and to help a country overcome its poverty. This also means that we fight the ruling class of those who draw all the land to themselves and oppress the poor farmers. It is important to work out a balance between a legal defense system for a country and a reduction of horrifying and morally despicable nuclear and chemical weapons. Such actions are signs of the coming Kingdom. Vishal Mangalwadi writes:

“The evangelicals of William Carey's generation believed that the darkness will not overcome the light (John 1:3) and that a little leaven of the gospel will transform the whole dough (Matthew 13:3). Therefore they had the motivation to resist evils in their society. Today, however, much of the church suffers from

an eschatological paralysis. That is, we are robbed of all meaningful motivation to challenge evils, by the prevalent belief that darkness will continue to grow till the end of history, even though we continue to launch new multi-million pound projects almost each week to spread the light.

The terrible 'success' of Fascism, Nazism, and Communism in our century, and the two horrible world wars have destroyed all secular hopes for the future of mankind in present history. Much of the church has read the Scriptures with that pessimistic outlook of our age and baptized it with theological rationale. So we just mourn the coming destruction of 'The Late Great Planet Earth' instead of seeking to redeem it.

The Evangelicals of the earlier era had hope for man and his planet because they believed that, far from abandoning this world, God who is faithful to his word and his creation had made a covenant with this planet. Not only that, the eternal infinite God had personally entered the finite, space-time world of fallen man with his salvation. The kingdom of God had broken into the kingdoms of this world and the gates of Hades will not overcome it (Matthew 16:18). Therefore Christian hope is not beyond history but within

it.” [Mangalwadi, Vishal, *Truth and Social Reform*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1989, p. 113.]

What are the implications of this Christian view of the future?

The clearest answer is given to us in the book of Acts. When the disciples after Jesus’ resurrection asked him: “Lord are you at this time restoring the Kingdom to Israel?” Jesus did not deny for a moment that this was the final purpose of his coming; nor did he deny that this would be a real kingdom, with Israel in the middle and all the nations around it. Nevertheless he told them: “It is not your job to find out the timetable of my return, you do better to go out to all nations and bear witness to my Kingship.”

For this purpose he promised them and us the Holy Spirit. This Spirit is given to enable us to do the work he has commanded us to do; making the kingdom visible—visible by the fruits of the Spirit, that will give a foretaste of the coming kingdom. These fruits are the five loaves and two fishes he wants us to give him at his return. And he will multiply them to feed the crowd. Let us, at his coming, not have empty hands.

About Wim Rietkerk

Wim Rietkerk was educated at Leydon University in Philosophy of Religion and graduated in Theology at Kampen. He has worked as a pastor for many years along with leading L'Abri Fellowship in Holland. He is the author of several books including co-authoring *What in the World is Real: Challenging the Superficial in Today's World*. He currently serves at the Chairman of L'Abri Fellowship's International Board of Trustees.

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