Preaching as Eschatology: Calling the Future into the Present

Casey Barton, director of the Pastoral Ministry Program
Lancaster Bible College and Capital Seminary, Lancaster, Pennsylvania

Twenty years of pastoral ministry has brought at least two important observations regarding the practical eschatology present both in faith journeys of average church members and in proclaimed eschatology from the pulpit. First, the eschatological hope of many church members rests in the belief that Christ will come soon to rescue them from the pain, discomfort, and cultural battles that they themselves, and the church as a whole, currently face. Broadly speaking, this reflects an escapist theology that leans into a rescue from the trials of the world over the call to transform the world through the activity of bringing about God's kingdom. Second, preaching about eschatology is largely absent or locates God in some time other than now, through casting eschatology as exclusively future, primarily past, or outside of time through allegorization. With God located sometime other than now, escapist tendencies in faith journeys are reinforced. This may reflect an underdeveloped eschatological theology on the part of the preacher as well.

This essay begins the development of an eschatological theology of proclamation that is rooted in a biblical framework proposed by theologians such as N.T. Wright and Kevin Vanhoozer which presents Scripture and theology as enacted drama. Further, it will take guidance from Jürgen Moltmann's assertion that all theology is done within the context of eschatology. Preaching must be an eschatological act of proclamation that seeks to call the future fullness of God's kingdom into the present life and experience of God's people, enacting the conditions of God's future in the world right now.

First, the diminishment of eschatology, both in theology and from the pulpit, needs exploration, along with an understanding of the consequences of this absence. In response, a biblical theology shaped by the idea of enacted drama along with Moltmann's eschatological theology can be adopted as a matrix for understanding God's story eschatologically. This matrix then provides the context for pulpit proclamation. In this light, preaching calls God's people to participate in God's story through "eschatological deeds of hope."[1] Pulpit proclamation itself becomes an eschatological act, calling God's future kingdom into history's present.

The Diminishment of Pulpit Eschatology

In 1962, biblical theologian Krister Stendahl lamented the diminishment of eschatology in contemporary theologies. In the systematic theological thought of his time, "biblical eschatology—i.e., the matrix of all NT thought—was taken care of in a 'last chapter' of systematic theology dealing with 'last things.'"[2] At times this "last chapter" occupies what may feel like an appendix at the end of a tome that has dealt with the more important doctrines of Scripture, the attributes of God, the identity and atoning work of Jesus Christ, and the Christian community. Chapters on eschatology tend to dwell on pieces of eschatological thought (the return of Christ, an interpretation of the millennium, the judgment of the dead, life everlasting), rather than presenting eschatology as a context for Christian theology and living.[3] As is the nature of much systematic thought (necessary as it is), this type of treatment of eschatology often compartmentalizes doctrine and in important ways dis-integrates it from the larger story of God's redemption of humanity.[4]

[1] See Jürgen Moltmann, "Theology as Eschatology," in *The Future of Hope: Theology as Eschatology*, ed. Frederick Herzog (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 3.

[2] Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in vol. 1 of *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962), 435.

[3] For instance, Wayne Grudem's popular volume and Robert Reymond's systematic theology from a Reformed perspective both place eschatology at the very end of their volumes, somewhat compartmentalizing the doctrine in the process. In contrast, a more recent volume has sought to purposefully take eschatology as the context for the entirety of systematic theology: Thomas N. Finger, *Systematic Theology Volume 1: An Eschatological Approach* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020). Also note Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994); Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998).

[4] I have written about this dynamic extensively in my book, *Preaching through Time: Anachronism as a Way Forward for Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017).

Theological shifts away from eschatology. Over the past two centuries many corners of Christian faith have covered over, diluted, or moved to the last chapter their proclamation of a future-oriented faith, which sees God breaking into human history in or from the future. The reasons for this shift are rooted in the Enlightenment and modern projects, especially throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which at a fundamental and philosophical level shifted the ground of being from God to humanity. For eschatology in the realm of biblical interpretation, an increasing anti-supernatural conviction and nontheistic approaches to the text in many ways neutralized traditional interpretations of biblical texts of eschatological importance. While the scope of this essay cannot fully explore these shifts themselves, their consequences, especially for the loss of an eschatological theology for the church and its proclamation, are important to note. Writing after these broad philosophical shifts and their effects on biblical interpretation and theology had occurred, Moltmann expands on some of the significant consequences for Christian faith.

Having moved through Enlightenment and modern philosophical and theological shifts, for many, "the theistic, cosmological or, as one says, mythological world view has become antiquated in its basic categories," Moltmann writes. However, these theological and philosophical shifts have not adequately addressed some of the most basic questions of human experience that Christianity has always sought to answer:

> But it is banal pathos of the Enlightenment to pass over the basic question that this world view, demythologized by Kant, Feuerbach, and now by the existential interpretation of theologians, lies a real plight of man and a real initiative to overcome it as well. The plight underlying theistic world explanation is the theodicy question: the question of the justification of God in the world.[5]

For Moltmann, a credible theology centers upon answering two foundational questions necessary to maintain a theistic worldview. These questions have been left unanswered in modernity and in the theological thought it has produced. The first, he notes, has to do with the justification of God in the world: Is God present in the midst of the suffering of history? This is the theodicy question. The second flows from it: What is humanity's identity in light of God's presence? These two questions get

[5] Moltmann, "Theology as Eschatology," 3.

to the heart of the human condition and human need. To answer these pressing human questions, Moltmann asserts that what is needed is the recovery of a theology able to appeal to a hope in a shared future, which governs the experience of the present.[6] With the loss of an eschatological voice it is worth asking whether Christianity is invested in the prospect of hope for the future:

> In the past two centuries, a Christian faith in God without hope for the future of the world has called forth a secular hope for the future of the world without faith in God.…We have arrived at a moment in history that provokes the question: Should there now be a parting of the ways in history, so that faith aligns itself with the past and unfaith with the future?[7]

Christianity suffers a crisis of credibility when eschatology is not the matrix of theological thinking. This matrix is able to hold together the tension between past, present, and future. It calls for a hope from the future that governs Christianity's experience of God and identity in the present. The question of God's presence in human misery in the modern era has shifted toward being answered by atheism, and theology has been replaced by anthropology for addressing questions of human identity.

Moltmann asserts that in this context, a dialectical unity necessary for Christianity to exist has broken down: the tension between the historical and the absolute; the appearance of God in history. He writes:

> As long as the dialectical unity of a particular history and special historical mediation with the universally relevant that pertains directly to everyone can be retained, that is, as long as the unity of Jesus with God and of God with Jesus can be retained, Christianity is alive. As soon as the dialectical unity between history and the absolute is broken, Christianity dis-integrates.…Today we stand in the midst of the disintegration of this dialectical unity.[8]

With the fracture of God with particular history, that is to say, the

[6] It is important to note that eschatology is not fully absent from Christian theology. As I will discuss below, it persists largely in futuristic, realized, and demythologized forms. These have been, however, theologies inadequate to handle these questions of theodicy and identity, because of how they tend to dis-integrate time.

[7] Jürgen Moltmann, "Hope and History," *Theology Today*, 25 (1968), 369-370.

[8] Moltmann, "Theology as Eschatology," 2

historical and the absolute, the questions of theodicy and human identity are unanswerable by Christian faith. Yet the questions still remain, answered in a sort of secular eschatology that attempts to find answers outside of a theistic framework: "After the mythological world view has been scientifically superseded, the theodicy question still remains, in its open radicality more inescapable than before, as modern atheism shows."[9]

Foundationally, for preaching and indeed for all practical theology, pastoral ministry, and Christian faith, the dialectical unity of the historical and the absolute that Moltmann points to has held together in the appearance of Jesus Christ. It is in the incarnation that God has most fully and decisively made his unity with his creation known. The inbreaking of the absolute into history in the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and rule of Jesus Christ is the center of Christian faith in which this dialectical unity has held together. Christian faith and practical theology flowing from this unity must survive suspicion or derision from the shifts of modern thought and criticism by finding the biblical theology that can continue to hold the center.

Homiletical Moves away from Eschatology. The shifts of which Moltmann writes and their consequences have complements in the loss of eschatology in the pulpit. Writing specifically in reference to preaching, homiletician Thomas Long writes that in the nineteenth century, "among educated clergy in the churches we have come to call 'mainline,' the language of heaven, hell, Christ's coming reign, and the final judgment were recurring and important topics of sermons . . . but by the close of the twentieth century a veil of embarrassment had been thrown over the whole matter."[10]

Long goes on to give depth to the story of eschatology's diminishment in preaching. In his analysis, the predominant eschatology popular in pulpits at the time was postmillennialism which focused on the action of the church in "working for progress and enlightenment in society, gradually effecting the kingdom and its purposes in human affairs."[11] This theology offered a thoughtful biblical apocalypticism crossed with a responsibility for the progress of God's kingdom through practical engagement in the betterment of society. Long summarizes the move-

[9] Moltmann.

[10] Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 112.

[11] Long, 114.

ment: "History was . . . unfolding, evolving, and progressing toward the time when Christ would be all in all, and human beings had a role to play in this grand redevelopment project."[12] This unfolding and evolving aspect of postmillennialism differentiated the theology from the competing eschatology of the time, premillennialism, which displayed a greater emphasis on, and expectation for, the apocalyptic quality of last things.

Both postmillennial and premillennial eschatologies were, however, to meet societal and philosophical developments that significantly challenged their legitimacy. These nineteenth-century theologies held to foundations marked by a strong insistence on the literal accuracy of the biblical text, the uniqueness and superiority of Christianity as a religion, and a view of humans as rational beings separate from and more special than the rest of creation. These foundations, each in turn, suffered damage with the development of German higher criticism, the rise of anthropology and the comparative study of religions, and the proposal of evolutionary theory. In a new intellectual and cultural milieu marked by science and rationality, a future-oriented eschatology was largely abandoned in theological thought and consequently in the pulpit.

Whether in mainline or evangelical traditions, Long identifies surviving forms of eschatology in the pulpit existing in one of three broad categories: futuristic (often a mark of fundamentalist theologies), realized, and demythologized. Futuristic eschatology holds on to tenets of earlier theologies, elevating the future over and against the present and the past, often embracing a robust apocalypticism and making the future the real goal of one's faith or existence. This often results in casting God's presence in the future and can tend toward an escapist theology that primarily seeks removal from this world with its problems. Realized eschatology recasts the future as the past, thus diminishing the future aspect of God's drama and marginalizing hope for the renewal of all things. A demythologized eschatology, largely allegorical in nature, seeks an understanding of God outside of actual time and event, finding meaning in universal timeless narratives and categories.[13] In each treatment of the future from the pulpit, the congregation is left with the same fundamental questions of theodicy and identity.

[12] Long.

[13] Thomas G. Long, "Preaching God's Future: The Eschatological Context of Christian Proclamation," in *Sharing Heaven's Music: The Heart of Christian Preaching*, ed. Barry L. Callen (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1985), 196.

A Persistent Search for Hope. Yet, fundamental questions persist. With the absence of answers from the church, and in a media-narrated era, people are simply looking for hope in different places. The abundance of films and television shows set in postapocalyptic times in which characters are continually met with the basic questions of human misery and human identity are evidence of the longing for answers. The popular television show *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022), which traces the lives of survivors in a zombie apocalypse, regularly explores themes of human misery and human identity, both from theistic and atheistic perspectives. The show has displayed above-average longevity, running for eleven seasons. It is based on a critically acclaimed graphic novel that recently ended an even longer run of sixteen years (2003–2019). Films such as *The Book of Eli* (2010) tell stories about finding human identity in the midst of human misery.[14] *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* (2012) comedically adopts apocalyptic themes to highlight the importance of human relationship in the midst of humanity's inescapable appointment with death. The film *A Boy Called Christmas* (2022) proposes an atheistic ground for human kindness and a hope for a peaceful present and future by dramatizing an origin story for Christmas that purposefully excises God and the Christ narrative.

These cultural artifacts begin to serve as the experiential moments in which people seek and find answers to ultimate questions. Film and religion scholar Margaret Miles has asserted that popular culture has replaced the pulpit as the primary voice shaping people's morals and values:

> "Congregations" became "audiences" as film created a new public sphere in which, under the guise of "entertainment," values are formulated, circulated, resisted, and negotiated. … [T]he representation and examination of values and moral commitments does not presently occur most pointedly in churches, synagogues, or mosques, but before the eyes of "congregations" in movie theaters. North Americans—even those with religious affiliations—now gather about cinema and television screens rather than in churches to ponder the moral quandaries of American life.[15]

[14] The twist in this film actually shows the character's identity found in Scripture and in conforming to the image of Christ.

[15] Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 25.

Long has acknowledged this trend away from the pulpit in the search for hope and meaning. He writes, "Our novelists and artists are sensing the power of the eschatological vision. So far, though, this renewal of eschatological thinking and language has bypassed the American pulpit, which remains stuck in the funeral rites of the death of nineteenth-century thought forms."[16] Popular cultural artifacts have become the sermons of the day offering a hope and identity disconnected from Christian faith. David Greenhaw echoes much of Long's eschatological longing, saying that forms of preaching devoid of the eschatological imagination assume "that God is finished with the world." Preaching without some form of eschatological hope "has lost its imagination for a new world and is circumscribed in the closed circle of extant reality… unable to transcend what is already present."[17] This type of preaching can then only provide resources for living in the present, not give hope for the future.

This reality of a homiletic that offers resources for living in the present rather than a hope for the future is observable in the last two years as many churches have moved their church services online in response to the danger posed by gathering during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, of necessity, church members have increasingly been isolated and worship has been mediated through a screen. Even as the pandemic has begun to recede, many churches have seen members not coming back to worship, preferring the screen to real presence. It is worth considering whether the mediation of morals, values, and truth in contemporary popular culture has conditioned many in the church to prefer the screen to the chancel and pew. It is equally worth considering how the diminishment of a developed biblical eschatology has reinforced a hopelessness for the world and a desire to escape. If Long and Greenhaw are correct, a homiletic with an underdeveloped eschatology during this time would focus on "living in the present," or, on just *making it through* this time of pandemic and isolation. This would be distinct from offering a robust eschatological hope that comes from the future that calls to action in the present.[18] The loss of eschatology in the pulpit is the loss of hope. A recovered eschatological voice must provide a hope for the present rooted in God's promise for the future.

[16] Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope,* 123.

[17] David Greenhaw, "Preaching and Eschatology: Opening a New World in Preaching," *Journal for Preachers* 12.3 (1989): 3.

[18] A study of sermons preached in various churches from March 2020 through the pandemic would provide insight to this observation.

The following seeks to recover an eschatological voice for preaching specifically rooted in a theological framework that is dramatically shaped and hence, as storied, places priority on the future for the interpretation and hope in the present. A dramatic theology marked by an emphasis on God's future will help to recover an eschatological voice in the pulpit.

Theology as Eschatology: God's Coming Future

N.T. Wright's conceptualization of Scripture as an incomplete five-act play provides an interpretive framework for theology, while Moltmann's eschatological theology gives the language of promise and anticipation, as one looks for the hope of God's future and the participation it calls for in the present. While a detailed engagement of Wright's dramatic theology and Moltmann's eschatological theology are beyond the scope of this essay, an overview will help provide a theological framework necessary to begin rebuilding an eschatological voice in the pulpit.

The Gospel in Five Acts. In an extended discussion on how one might conceptualize the authoritative nature of the Bible, N.T. Wright compares Scripture to an unfinished drama in which the first four acts are extant:

> Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play whose fifth act has been lost. The first four acts provide, let us suppose, such a wealth of characterization, such a crescendo of excitement within the plot, that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged. Nevertheless, it is felt inappropriate actually to write the fifth act once and for all: it would be to freeze the play into one form and commit Shakespeare as it were to being prospectively responsible for work not in fact his own. Better, it might be felt, to give the key parts to highly trained, sensitive and experienced Shakespearian actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, *and who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves*.[19]

Wright then goes on to draw the comparison to the Bible as an unfinished drama with the five acts unfolding as follows:

> (1) Creation; (2) Fall; (3) Israel; (4) Jesus. The New Testament would then form the first scene in the fifth act, giving

[19] N.T. Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991):18.

> hints as well (Rom 8; 1 Cor 15; parts of the Apocalypse) of how the play is supposed to end. The church would then live under the "authority" of the extant story, being required to offer something between an improvisation and an actual performance of the final act.[20]

In such a dramatic schema, the church in the present finds itself caught in between the revealed and authoritative story of God with his people in the historical past, as well as the destination of the whole of the story in the future.

Caught between past and future, or between promised future and the promise's fulfillment, God's people must live in fidelity to both the story as revealed so far, and in alignment with the story's future destination. As a story enacted as drama, then, priority for interpreting the past and present must be given to the future. As in all stories, the last page exercises interpretive control over all that came before. Preacher Paul Scott Wilson observes, "Life as we know it is like a book; how it ends affects the whole and implies the beginning. Each part connects with the beginning and leads to the end."[21] In this sense, the drama is understood most completely from its end.

Theology from the End to the Beginning. Moltmann's eschatological theology helps the preacher understand this priority of the future in bringing hope to the present. Central to his eschatology is the assertion that, because of God's promise for a hopeful future, both given by Christ and guaranteed in his death and resurrection, all theological thinking about God is eschatological:

> From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element *of* Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day.[22]

[20] Wright, 19.

[21] Paul Scott Wilson, *Broken Words: Reflections on the Craft of Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2004), 152.

[22] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 15–16.

All theology occurs in the context of a promised future dependent on the trustworthiness of the promise-maker and reaches toward an anticipation of that future, which is continually flowing into the present. If all theology is done in the light of God's promised future exercising influence over the present, all preaching is done in this same context.

Central to the Christian narrative is the claim that God has appeared concretely in history in the person of Jesus Christ, and in Christ has promised a hopeful future. In his life, death, and resurrection Jesus both enacts God's kingdom in the present in his living and opens God's kingdom in the future in his resurrection and promised second advent: "In his words and deeds Jesus has anticipated the kingdom of God and has opened the coming of the kingdom. In the resurrection from the dead God has anticipated in this *one* his kingdom of 'life from the dead,' and has herein, through this *one*, opened the future of the resurrection and the life."[23] In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus is the incarnation of God's future within concrete history.

Jesus is the one who has come to initiate God's promised, hopeful future, and he is the one who is presently coming, continually fulfilling the promise of a hopeful destination. One can then *anticipate* God's promised, hopeful future as something new that is continually making its way into the present. Anticipation of God's coming shifts one's perspective toward the future and looks for something new. This is different from a view of the future as extrapolated from the past, which ultimately sees the future as merely the continuation and evolution of the past and present. Nothing new can be expected from an extrapolation of the past into the future, and hope for the oppressed remains elusive. However, because Christ is actively coming even now, the future has controlling power over the present. This opens an anticipation of something new that exercises influence over the present, compelling the present to make decisions based upon its coming.

This theological conception of the church being caught in the fifth act, living out of the memory of God's promise in Christ and toward the fulfillment of that promise in a future flowing into the present, has consequences for theology, for all of church life, and indeed for preaching. These include providing answers to the questions of theodicy and identity, and compelling toward hopeful action in the present. In answer to the theodicy question, Moltmann's eschatology asserts that God has appeared

[23] Moltmann, "Theology as Eschatology," 23.

in the midst of the misery of this world concretely in the person of Jesus Christ and has suffered misery with a suffering humanity. Hope for the misery experienced in history is found in the reality of a God who has suffered, and in that suffering has promised a future filled with hope and marked by the absence of suffering. This promised future is guaranteed in God's triumph over the misery of the world in the resurrection. It is experienced as God's hopeful future that is continually coming into the world right now and which one day will be consummated. The question of human identity is answered in the person of Christ who has taken on human identity and has undergone for humanity that which will be done for all. Christ's life, death, and resurrection reveals an identity in which humanity consists of beloved children of God who will participate fully in God's kingdom, just as Christ has on behalf of all.

Creative Eschatology: Deeds of Hope. A further consequence of this dramatically shaped eschatological theology is that the end of the story places the present in a place of having to make decisions based on the kingdom that is coming. Moltmann asserts that eschatology is not a passive theology, or, as identified above, this eschatology is not escapist in nature. If God's future has been enacted by Christ and is coming into the present, anticipation of the coming future must compel the church to become fellow workers with Christ in the kingdom's appearance: "Christian eschatology is not an apocalyptic explanation of the world and also not a private illumination of existence, but the horizon of expectation for a world-transforming initiative through which the 'renewal of the world is anticipated in this age in a certain sense.'"[24] Central to eschatology is its story of hope for the present. It is a story in which God's people participate in that hope as "construction workers and not only interpreters of the future whose power in hope as well as in fulfillment is God."[25]

Moltmann refers to the world-changing initiative of a church caught in the fifth act as engaging in "deeds of eschatological hope." There are at least three avenues through which the church brings the hope of the future into the world now, centering upon proclamation of the gospel, formation of the church, and conformity to Christ.

The first deed of eschatological hope is the "proclamation of the Gospel of the kingdom to the poor … and the proclamation of the righteousness

[24] Moltmann.
[25] Moltmann, 45.

of God to Jews and Gentiles, insofar as all have sinned."[26] The gospel offers hope to all at the core of all human misery in that it offers the lost and forsaken real hope for being found and loved. Proclamation of this hope must stand as a priority for the follower of Christ and for Christ's church who seek to live now under the conditions of the future.

The second deed of eschatological hope is the founding of the church which breaks down the barriers with which people separate themselves from one another. The Christian congregation is established from among those who differ, disregarding borderlines such as race, social standing, class, and familial history. In this way the church now begins to look like the promised future kingdom.

The third deed of eschatological hope is "the creative, battling, and loving obedience ready to suffer in the everyday situations of the present world. It is the attempt, under the conditions of estrangement, to live already here out of the promised future of our true home."[27] This is a call to discipleship and the development of conformity to Jesus Christ who is the presence of God's future in the midst of history. Moltmann goes on to say that this is the "transformation of life, transformation of society, transformation of the world in the possibilities that one is afforded or that one meets, favoring the new life, the new community, the new world."[28]

Preaching As Eschatology

This dramatically shaped theology, with its emphasis on how the revealed future of the story exercises interpretive and performative influence over the present, can help give expression to the eschatological voice in the Christian pulpit today.[29] Just as all theology is eschatology, inasmuch as the sermon both occurs within the context of the tension between promise and fulfillment, and as it calls for the enactment of deeds of

[26] Moltmann, 37.
[27] Moltmann, 38.
[28] Moltmann.
[29] It is important to note that Moltmann's theology is not a return to pre-modern modes of eschatological thought. Even while rejecting some of modernity's claims and maintaining a thoroughly theistic framework, Moltmann acknowledges that moving back to a theology that existed prior to modern theological shifts is both impossible and undesirable. Yet, it is untenable to do theology in terms that exclude the historical character of biblical revelation which speaks of God in specifically historical ways. Moltmann's theology pushes away from apocalypticism and therefore shifts the conversation toward an anticipation of the future. This future gives hope for the present while avoiding pitfalls of futuristic, realized, and demythologized eschatologies by holding modes of time in tension and locating God's eschatological presence and work as continually coming into the world right now.

eschatological hope based upon that promise and fulfillment, it can be said that preaching is eschatology.

The Eschatological Matrix of Proclamation. The context for preaching in the present is both dramatic and eschatological. By virtue of their concrete moment in time, the preacher and the congregation exist in the unfinished fifth act of the dramatic story God is telling. As Kevin Vanhoozer has argued, in light of the drama's past and its coming future, the goal of Christian discipleship is to live in a fitting relationship with both how the story has developed and with where the story is headed.[30] Wright described this as an informed improvisation of the drama based upon the knowledge of the story's past and its future.[31] Proclamation within this context, then, will seek to reveal this story and give guidance for God's people who seek to fittingly live in alignment with it.

The theology laid out above represents an eschatological matrix of thought for the preacher creating the sermon. The preacher must remember that his or her moment in the drama is caught in the tension between the past and the promised and hoped for future. That future, then, continually exercises influence over how God's people are to live in and shape the present. The sermon participates in this eschatological influence by proclaiming the story of God's future and guiding the church for faithful living within its conditions now.

A biblically faithful homiletical project calls for diligent exegetical work with the biblical text. This work includes researching historical context, culture, and language and grammatical structures from the past moment of the text's writing. Importantly, the preacher's work brings that historical work into conversation with the present moment, seeking faithful ways to live according to God's story right now. An eschatological matrix for homiletics purposefully and organically considers the conditions of God's promised future in exegetical and hermeneutical work. This must be the case because God's future exercises leverage over understanding both the present and the past. Just as the preacher must exegete the past acts of God's drama and interpret this context for his or her own moment, the future of the story must be given interpretive voice. This should involve always proclaiming the hopefulness of God's future that flows

[30] Kevin Vanhoozer thoroughly expands Wright's dramatic theology in his work *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

[31] Wright, "How Can the Bible?" 19.

into the present and addresses earthly miseries, as we await the promise's consummation. Proclamation between Christ's first and second advents, or between promise and fulfillment, then takes into consideration that both the text and the present congregation find a common future in God's promised kingdom.[32] The dramatic and eschatological matrix of thought demands that God's future become a part of every sermon, not merely those based on texts that address "last things."

Practical engagement with eschatological theology for the preacher, then, could take the shape of shifting the sermon's traditional emphasis on *application* towards a purposeful call to *participation*. Application is a category rooted in extrapolation of the past rather than in anticipation of the future. Application in a sermon asks the question "based on what I have heard about the past of God's story (inasmuch as the preacher preaches from the text), what might I believe or do differently in the present?" Shifting toward an eschatological anticipation of God's future will have the effect of the preacher calling the congregation to *participate* in what God is doing now that flows from his promised future. Participation in God's dramatic story asks the question "based on what God has done and upon what God has promised and is doing right now as his future is coming, how might I participate in this hopeful future now?" This is a significant shift in calling for a creative Christian faith that identifies the believer as a fellow worker with God in bringing the fullness of his kingdom. This creative and participatory eschatology works directly against an escapist view that waits or longs for removal from the world or an end to history.

This shift toward an eschatological homiletic of active participation can find further guidance in its proclamation in Moltmann's deeds of eschatological hope.

Preaching as Eschatology: Deeds of Eschatological Hope. The performative nature of the sermon works toward calling the future into the present. Words do not merely say things, words *do* things. This fact casts the sermon (indeed all speech) as active and performative, calling for a response.[33] That is, the active and performative nature of the sermon calls for participation in the drama that it proclaims. Just

[32] Greenhaw, "Preaching and Eschatology," 9, notes that "The text's future and the congregation's future can thus become the common ground between two divergent worlds."

[33] Vanhoozer persuasively discusses the importance of the speech-act for theology at length. See his *The Drama of Doctrine*, 57–76.

as Moltmann sees the consequence of eschatology as the engagement in a world-transforming initiative in which the church labors to bring the conditions of the future kingdom into the present, the sermon can serve as a call to the church to engage in this work. The sermon can pull the conditions of the future into the present by calling the church to an active participation with God. As a beginning point, the sermon can call the church to participate in deeds of eschatological hope.

The first deed of eschatological hope the church participates in is the proclamation of God's righteousness to the poor, and indeed to all who are lost and forsaken. Within a dramatic and eschatological matrix, the preacher preparing the sermon can take this as a primary goal of the homiletical task: the proclamation of hope. Paul Scott Wilson has made the case that two problems contemporary sermons exhibit is that preachers rarely preach about God, and that they do not make it all the way to a proclamation of the grace of the gospel. Instead, sermons often become about humans (anthropology as opposed to theology), and they often leave the burden for receiving grace upon the shoulders of listeners who cannot intrinsically relieve that burden.[34] Preaching as eschatology sets as a priority for proclamation the eschatological context of all biblical interpretation and preaching. The coming of God's hopeful future becomes the theological context of every sermon as it is for every lived moment. This sets the goal of the sermon as the proclamation of God's righteousness, grace, and hope to all people.[35] In this way, the sermon seeks to affect the replacement of lostness and forsakenness with an identity of being loved and found.

Second, the eschatological context pushes toward the creation of Christian community that actively breaks down boundaries traditionally separating people, such as race, socioeconomic class, social standing, education, and familial origin. Preaching that seeks to create this type of church calls for active participation in activities that break down these barriers and bring healing and restoration between traditionally divided groups of people. The call for justice that replaces historical and present

[34] This is the theme of a major portion of Wilson's writing. For instance, his *The Four Pages of the Sermon* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2018) is in many ways the development of a homiletical theology designed to prevent these two mistakes.

[35] I would also affirm that the sermon is to be textual, that is, guided and governed by the intent of the author of the biblical text upon which the sermon is preached. My advocacy here is that the interpretation of the text and its proclamation take place within the eschatological reality of God's hopeful future continually coming into the present.

injustice—a mark of God's future kingdom—will become a prominent theme of proclamation. Indeed, the call to participate in attitudes and activities that are foundational qualities of God's promised future in Christ will become regular themes of worship: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22–23, ESV). As this fruit is manifest in the lives of the believer, the church will become what it will be: a community of all people worshiping together in equality before God (Rev. 7:9–12).

A third deed of eschatological hope that preaching may participate in and call for is the formation of disciples committed to living out the conditions of the future in their lives in the present. Preaching as eschatology will recognize that Christians "live not for a future which has not begun as yet, but which has already arrived in Christ and which—coming from him—will change the world."[36] Preaching, then, calls for participation in the future which Christ brings. Moltmann describes this work of discipleship:

> If the Christians hope for this future of God, they not only wait for it, but also look for it, love it, and strive for it. The eschatological will leads to decisions that are live options in the present. The decision for the goal determines the means and ways that lead to the goal. In the living correspondence of the Christians to this future, the future already finds a real form.[37]

Preaching with an eschatological voice sets as a goal the formation of the future within the lives of hearers. This is applicable not only to Christian preaching but can also set the agenda for pastoral ministry and leadership more broadly.

Conclusion

While the state of the Christian pulpit may be that the eschatological voice of a promised future has been diminished, taking eschatology as a theological context can work to resurrect the eschatological imagination of the preacher. Inasmuch as preaching takes on a dramatic framework

[36] Moltmann, "Theology as Eschatology," 46.
[37] Moltmann.

and engages in the eschatological language of promise and anticipation, it can recover an important piece of biblical proclamation in a credible way that has practical implications for the church in the present. Just as all preaching is done in the shadow of the cross, it is also done in the dawn of God's hopeful future. Preaching as eschatology calls for God's people to hope for the present because of a faith in God's coming future. This hope, established in the cross and resurrection of Jesus and the promises that it confirms becomes the ground for a world-transforming initiative of God's people actively working with God to bring his future into this moment right now.