"I believe ... in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

Why are we here? Where are we going? Does history have any point to it, or is it, in the familiar words of Macbeth, "a story told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"? Because God has spoken, the Christian has a view of history that reaches beyond the events by themselves and provides the interpretation that makes sense of what might otherwise lead us to Macbeth's conclusion. It is not that there aren't other large-scale interpretations of history. The Marxist believes that history is the dialectical struggle of the working class; the capitalist believes that it is the triumph of the market's "invisible hand," while artists and scientists both struggle for their own right to give some definition to our otherwise vaporous lives.

Only Christianity locates the meaning of history within history (i.e., the Resurrection) without abandoning belief in another world. Furthermore, Christianity maintains that through that historical event we accept as God's gift the disclosure of meaning and purpose for all human and cosmic existence. Too often discussions of the "last things" focus on speculative hunches about how the morning newspaper somehow fulfills biblical prophecy. When we concentrate narrowly on questions about the end times, we actually miss the richness of biblical teaching on eschatology.

Thy Kingdom Come

Throughout the Old Testament believers longed for the inauguration of the New Age, the Age of the Spirit, when the serpent is finally cast out of the garden, his head crushed, and sin, death, and suffering vanquished. In our Lord's earthly ministry, this kingdom was not only announced, it was present (Luke 11:20) and this means that the believer has already been transferred from the realm over which the world, the flesh, and the devil reign in death into the kingdom of Christ (2 Pet. 1:11). This kingdom, however, is not merely individual, but cosmic. From a mustard seed, it grows into a mighty tree (Matt. 13:31) and like a dragnet it sweeps the nations into it (v. 47). It is the field into which the seeds of eternal life are planted, a plot of land so valuable to the farmer that he gave his greatest treasure to buy it (v. 44).

Nevertheless, the dragnet is filled with fish destined to be destroyed: "This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v. 49). And the field purchased at such great expense yields both wheat and tares, some seed sown by the Spirit and others by the enemy. Nevertheless, just as the fishermen are not to separate the fish, Jesus explains that we must not "weed" God's garden yet, "because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest," and then judgment will come (vv. 29-30).

So Christ's kingdom, though present in the power of the Word and Spirit, is nevertheless both qualitatively and quantitatively different from the fullness of the kingdom in the age to come. Although the kingdom is spreading throughout the world, it is never identified with the world in this age, but must always be distinguished from the temporal kingdoms and cultural identities that believers share with unbelievers. Only with the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11:15 do we finally hear the announcement, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever." It comes as a decisive event, not as a gradual process, for it is not the Church that carries the world into the Promised Land on her shoulders, but the Church herself whom the Rider of the White Horse carries on his train. It is he who, at the end of the age, sends his angels to drive the Canaanites out of the land and to bring Sabbath rest finally to Israel's war-weary camp.
Already/Not Yet

The coming of the kingdom depends upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It guarantees the "new creation." How does this happen? In terms of both Old Testament anticipation and New Testament explanation, the resurrection has cosmic significance not simply because a dead man rose from the dead. After all, God raised Lazarus from the dead, too! What makes our Lord's resurrection significant is that it was part of an unfolding plot, a plan of redemption that began in the heart of God (election) and was now being worked out in human history. Jesus Christ's significance is anchored in the fact that he was the God-Man, the Mediator and Second Adam, representative head of the Church. Just as Adam's sin lost humanity its acceptance and holiness before God, Christ's obedience won for his new humanity the favor and righteousness of God. In Christ, a new world was born. In his virgin conception, a new spiritual race taken from the races of the world was made holy; in his perfect life, the Church was regarded as obedient despite its perpetual harlotry; in his atoning death, his people were relieved of the burden of the debt that they owed.

Biblical scholars distinguish between the "already" and the "not yet," as helpful guardrails against saying either that the kingdom inaugurated by Christ's resurrection is not present at all or that it is so fully present that we already enjoy all of its benefits. One denies the present reality of the kingdom, whereas the other seems to impatiently insist that it is here in all its consummation and fullness.

The "already" includes not merely a future verdict rendered in the present, but a future restoration brought forward into the present as well. Unlike justification, sanctification is imperfect and incomplete in this life, according to degrees. Nevertheless, it is complete in one sense: it radically reorients the believer from self to God at the deepest level. Just as total depravity means not that we are as bad as we could be, but that sin is pervasive (leaving no faculty untouched), so regeneration means not that we are as good as we could be, but that the restoration that has taken place is just as pervasive as sin.

In Romans 6 Paul makes it clear that by baptism our death to sin has been sealed and we are alive to God in Christ. This is a completed event. Too often, we reverse Paul's indicative and imperative and create schemes of sanctification that at least imply that the gifts described are somehow waiting to be grasped or attained, perhaps only by an elite band of spiritual Christians. Instead, the decisiveness of baptism assures us of the decisiveness of this act of rebirth and renewal, toppling the government of Satan.

Thus, the Christian warfare initiated by the Spirit in regeneration, however weakly endeavored, is not merely directed at some sins, but at all sins and is determined to obedience not to some divine commands, but to all. In other words, just as the future verdict is rendered in the present, so the future state (glorification) is at least embryonically realized in the present. Paul is so emphatic about this link between the future and the present that he can speak of glorification as a completed event (Rom. 8:30).

Thus, the believer is said to taste "of the powers of the age to come" (Heb. 6:5). The "age to come" is the phrase Jesus uses in Luke 18:30; 20:35, and Matthew 12:32. Paul even refers to "ages to come" (Eph. 2:7). Jesus distinguished between "the sons of this age" and "the sons of that [future] age" (Luke 20:34-35). And in Matthew 12:32 and Luke 18:29-30, our Lord again refers to these two ages. We are now, as Peter reminds us in his Pentecost sermon, living in "these last days" (Acts 2), but, as Jesus says, "the last day" (singular) refers to the very end of this age (John 6:39).

As theologian Hendrikus Berkhof points out, the believer looks forward to the future blessing not out of a sense of spiritual poverty here and now, but in view of the pledge and the spiritual blessings he or she already enjoys. It is out of present abundance that the future hope is all the brighter. Hence, in Ephesians Paul speaks of the "already" side of the equation: chosen, redeemed, forgiven, included in Christ, given the gift of faith, marked in Christ with the Holy Spirit as a seal guaranteeing our inheritance. It is this last gift especially that links the future to the present. This is why Jesus said it was better if he left, since he would then send his Spirit. His indwelling presence is the "deposit" guaranteeing that everything still laid up for us in the future belongs to us by promise here and now.

"Therefore," Paul joyfully announces, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." It is important that we do not read this individualistically, but realize that it is part of Paul's general line of thought: The new creation is the kingdom of God! We are made new individually only as this new creation, like a luminous and fragrant cloud, envelops us. "The old has gone, the new has come!" Paul says (2 Cor. 5:17). This is in the triumphant indicative mood, not in the form of a command. It is not something to be attained but a future fullness that has, by the power of Word and Spirit, broken into the present.

What Paul is announcing here is nothing short of this: The "age to come" is already present as those who are in Christ together are becoming shaped by the realities of the future world here and now. It is to that future world that we are conforming, not to the one that is passing away. "Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died
Modern Reformation

understanding of the body and the physical world. While some conservative Bible teachers actually announce the "already" character of our new age, Paul immediately describes the Christian life as a constant struggle, one in which obedience-howevers genuinely desired-is often frustrated by the believer's ongoing sinfulness. Lest the "already" of the new age in the Christian life lead to self-righteous triumphalism or despair, Paul so emphasizes the "not yet" character of the Spirit's present work that he leaves us crying out at the end of it all, "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" But his confidence is not in himself: "Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!" And thus, Paul's buoyancy returns not because he has learned how to gain victory over sin in his life, nor because he has discovered a virtue within himself that he had not considered, but because he has turned outside of himself to Christ and his all-sufficient righteousness.

Just as the resurrection of our bodies awaits a future day, so our struggle with sin will not end until the last day. But the body will be raised, says Paul: first Christ as the firstfruits, followed by those united to him by his flesh by faith. According to the ceremonial law, the Hebrews were to come to Jerusalem at the beginning of the harvest season and offer the first part of the harvest in recognition that the whole harvest belonged to God. In the New Testament epistles, Christ's resurrection and ours are so closely related that they are viewed as one single event. Our Savior's resurrection is not entirely unique: it was the "firstfruits" or down payment on the rest of the harvest. As Paul goes on to relate, our bodies will be raised in the likeness of Christ's immortal flesh (1 Cor. 15:48-9). Our divine brother now intercedes for us at the Father's right hand. He has taken our flesh into heaven beyond death and corruption, securing our own resurrection, ascension, and glorification.

In light of all this, we need to reflect on the resurrection of the body. Too often, death is treated as if it were a good thing. It is sometimes considered pious to talk about the "victory" that comes at the dissolution of the body. In last the spirit is free to fly upward to God! But this has Plato, not Paul, for its source. It is utterly foreign to the Hebrew-Christian understanding of the body and the physical world. While some conservative Bible teachers actually argue that the reason we continue to sin as Christians is that we live as redeemed spirits in fleshy bodies, the Scriptures affirm that our bodies are redeemed along with our souls. Both share in suffering and sanctification (Rom. 6:12-13; 12:1); only in unity together will both share in the glory that is to come (Rom. 8:23). Our great hope is not an ethereal, disembodied, "spiritlike" existence, floating on clouds while playing harps for all of eternity. Rather, "even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of the body" (Rom. 8:23).

For the ancient Gnostics, history was alien. In fact, everything remotely connected to this physical world-the body, desires, time, physical space, history, rituals that involved material substances-was regarded as subspiritual and, in fact, evil. Similarly, the modern age has adopted a highly mystical theory of history, where, as Hegel's and Nietzsche's famous devotee Nikos Katzanzakis put it, "matter gives way to Spirit." Refusing to make peace with the natural world as a given from God, our whole age has been obsessed with remaking the world by escaping its realities. With the ancient Gnostic, modern men and women seek to defy the world of space and time and escape it.

Unfortunately, many Christians share this modern outlook. With the ancient Gnostics, the resurrection of the body is often downplayed or even ignored in favor of the common notion that it is, after all, our physical body that keeps us tied to this sinful world, while our pure spirits enjoy unmediated access to God. In this perspective, history is suprahistorical-a Rapture, a Second Coming, or similar events, that direct the believer's understanding of the future. And yet, even here we see enormous benefits in realizing that the future return of our Lord itself is far from suprahistorical. He is going to return to the same physical world, occupying the same time line of historical events, still incarnate in the same human body that characterized his first advent.

If we see "this present evil age" and "the age to come" in terms of the contrast between this physical world and the innocent spirit, however we might express this in more innocuous terms, we will be wandering into the same Gnostic mire that has so plagued our age. In paganism, the goal is salvation from the body and the world in real history. In Christianity, the goal is the salvation of the body and the world in real history. This is a terribly important point in our day, for too many Christian funerals repeat the tragic errors of this Gnostic view of matter. For instance, we hear that Aunt Edna is better off now-not simply because, as Paul said, "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord"-but because she is now liberated from her earthly body. Corruption is attached too often in these cases not to human sinfulness, but to sinful humanness! If sin and corruption are somehow the product of our physical, material makeup, God would be the author of sin and his Son would not have been a sinless Savior. At the heart of the apostolic hope was not the escape from this world and from the physical body, but the resurrection of the body. This is precisely where the early Church ran into so many problems from her Gnostic adversaries. Many insisted, with Greek mysticism, that the body is the "prison-house" of the spirit. While spirit is good, matter is evil, so the Incarnation could never have been real. Jesus appeared to have a true human body, but it must have been a heavenly body, they said. Furthermore, the future resurrection is entirely spiritual. In fact, said many of these people, the final resurrection has already taken place as people are born again (see Paul's warning...
But Scripture is flatly opposed to this way of thinking. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul defends our Lord's resurrection as necessary for our own. For the apostles, the resurrection of the body is not a secondary issue to salvation but is at the heart of salvation itself. That which God saves is the person, not merely the soul or the spirit, so Paul can say in Romans 8 that our salvation is not truly complete until we receive this bodily resurrection. This, he says, is what it means for us to be revealed as God's children and for our adoption to be at last complete.

For many conservative Christians, the "Great Escape"-a popular term for the so-called "Rapture"-does not refer to the escape from the wrath of God but to an escape from "the late great planet earth." We must resist this unbiblical view of history and realize God's plan is to save both individual believers and the physical creation, and the future goal must be somehow pursued in the present. This contradicts the popular (although quite recent) theory of the Rapture. According to this doctrine's proponents, there is indeed a final resurrection of the dead, but before that event Jesus will come in the clouds and the remaining believers will be "caught up" to be with him during the seven-year tribulation. At the end of that tribulation, the dead will be raised and the raptured saints will return, along with the whole Church, with the Savior in judgment. The only major passage that offers even a remote possibility for such a teaching is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18:

We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own words, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

Yet this passage makes no mention of a "secret Rapture." Paul begins by telling us that this "coming" he has in view is the one in which "God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." So from the very beginning of this description, it is a story about Jesus coming with his Church and there is never any mention of two comings. This is one event that Paul describes, not a Rapture followed by a Second Coming. Where do we find the seven years in between these two events in this passage? The Lord descends and the dead are raised, while those still alive will be caught up together with the resurrected saints to meet the Lord in the air. Far from saying that at this point the Church is taken to heaven for seven years to return in judgment, instead we read, "And so we will be with the Lord forever." There is no way of construing a temporary interval between two comings. Finally, Paul says that this single event is marked by "a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God." This is hardly a secret event. It is a public pageant!

This is why Christians have always been looking forward to the Second Coming and not to a Rapture or any other intervening event. We are not looking to the next end-times scenario, predicting the prophetic significance of this or that headline in the morning newspaper, but are looking eagerly for the return of Christ. This is the next event in the unfolding of redemptive history. What an amazing thing for us to be living in this chapter of God's story, awaiting the final phase of God's saving events! We long not to escape our bodies or to escape this world, but we long for the final redemption and glorification of our bodies and the created world.

So Why Don't We See the Kingdom Right Now?

Like the early disciples, we, too, look for the signs of the kingdom in terms of what we can see. Not only are we used to seeing secular kingdoms born in pomp and ceremony; we have the example of Israel. "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" they asked the Resurrected Lord, and Jesus answers by telling them that he will send his Spirit upon his Church, as he had been sent upon Israel and into the temple. The Spirit will cause his people to become powerful witnesses to Christ throughout the world, so that the prophecies concerning this eternal kingdom spreading to all nations would be fulfilled (Acts 1:6-8).

Scripture represents the time in which we are now living as an in-between period, nestled between the First and Second Comings of Christ. Because Jesus himself announced the arrival of his kingdom, it must be here in some sense, and yet Scripture also points us toward the future consummation of this heavenly vision.

Our Lord himself handled this question by recognizing the gradual arrival of his kingdom: "Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, 'The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, "Here it is," or "There it is," because the kingdom of God is with and among you." (Luke 17:20-21). There is an "already" to the kingdom of God in the person of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, and yet, Jesus goes on in that same passage to warn against running after signs of the Second Coming (vv. 22-37). He will return on schedule, but, as in the days of Noah, it will catch the world by surprise. Our goal is not to try to bring the kingdom to us, but to become ingrafted into the kingdom now! It is coming upon us, rushing toward us, as heaven breaks in on earth as in
the days of Eden and Israel, but only the eye of faith can see it in its present form. While the unbeliever scoffs, "Where is this 'coming' he promised?" (2 Pet. 3:4), the believer sees the kingdom because he is in the presence of the Great King in Heaven, who "raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6-7).

This is why Jesus told Nicodemus, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). Here Jesus had claimed to be the long-awaited Messiah, the Lamb of God (John 1:29), the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (v. 34), the House of God Jacob saw in his vision, with angels ascending and descending (v. 51), the bringer of joy who turns water into wine (2:1-11), he who finally drives the serpent out of the temple-garden and then announces that he is himself the temple (vv. 12-19). Although Nicodemus, a respected Jewish rabbi, recognizes that Jesus has come from God, he is still thinking with a veil over his eyes so that he cannot see the kingdom. Even when Jesus tells him that the reason he cannot see the kingdom yet is that he is not born again, Nicodemus further reveals his blindness by confusing spiritual and physical birth.

So Jesus was not merely saying that apart from the new birth Nicodemus couldn't see the kingdom until after he died, but that he couldn't see it now! It was not apparent to him, because his kingdom, like his power and glory, were hidden. What king is born in a stable, spends most of his adult life as a carpenter, and is known by everyone in the neighborhood as "the boy next door"? It is only now that he begins his miraculous ministry, announcing his mission as the Son of David. The kingdom is still breaking into this world, the future rushing in upon the present, as the Holy Spirit brings the dead to life through his gospel.

Because of this, we know how the story ends and what the future will be like. The city of man, which persecuted the city of God with such relentless vengeance, will be defeated. The serpent's head was objectively crushed already in history, but we do not yet enjoy the effects of that decisive victory to the fullest. We hope, not out of blind optimism, but because of what we have already seen and heard.