CHAPTER THREE

CONSISTENT ESCHATOLOGY

In its historical context, Schweitzer’s interpretation of New Testament eschatology can be seen as a reaction against 19th century immanentism and liberalism. His thesis is as follows.

John the Baptist thought of himself as a prophet. Jesus alone (because of his messianic consciousness) saw him as ‘Eljah’.

Jesus believed himself to be the Messiah-designate and had a lively awareness of the nearness of the Kingdom of God and of his own glorification. But first repentance must be proclaimed and effected, Jesus leading the way. Thus he effected a synthesis of prophetic and apocalyptic eschatologies.

Through his mighty works he prepared for the Kingdom’s dawning. The mission of the twelve was ‘the last effort for bringing about the Kingdom’. Yet the expected advent delayed and Jesus came to realise that only through his own affliction would the kingdom dawn. The entry into Jerusalem was his ‘funeral march to victory’ and he died confidently expecting as the immediate consequence the dawning of the Kingdom and his own ‘coming’ as Messiah. Jesus’ expectation proved wrong.

It was his peculiar consciousness—a secret awareness progressively disclosed to Jesus at his baptism, to the three at the Transfiguration, to the Twelve shortly afterwards and through Judas to the authorities—which gave rise to this false expectation.

Schweitzer extends his thesis to include a study of Paul in which he assumes ‘the complete agreement of the teaching of Paul with that of Jesus’ (meaning that Paul’s thought was thoroughly Hebraic, and dominated by eschatology).

1 Cf. Mk. 9, 11-13. Mt. 11, 7ff. 11, 14 Ἡδείας ὑμῶν ἐφανετόν.
4 Cf. Mystery, p. 94f.
6 Cf. Mystery, pp. 256f.
7 Cf. Mystery, pp. 261.
9 Cf. Quest, p. 369.
10 Cf. Mysticism, pp. 185ff., 214ff.
view) regarded Jesus' death as the inauguration of the Messianic era and believed that an 'overlap' of aeons had occurred whereby the present world order continues, but its relevance is lost to those who are in Christ. This 'overlap' must cease when Jesus enters fully into his Kingdom and this event was regarded as imminent. The lingering power of the angels over the elect mattered little: the sacraments are temporary ad hoc institutions; ethics, now based on the past inauguration, are but interim ethics, and the present allows mystical union with Christ whereby one is here in this world, but also transcendently with Christ.

Following upon the loss, in the 2nd century, of the expectation of the immediate dawn of the Messianic Kingdom, Paul's thought (according to Schweitzer) was misunderstood, was Hellenised and translated into non-eschatological terms. The process was begun before the hope in a speedy coming of the Kingdom died, so that when the continued Parousia delay led eventually to the abandonment of an eschatological hope, a Hellenistic dogmatic system replaced it without disturbance. The process of change can be traced through Ignatius and Polycarp, Justin and John. It was facilitated because Paul's mysticism made Hellenisation possible.

We must turn to Paul for the gospel of Jesus: but only to 'the authentic Primitive Christian Paulinism', which may serve as our point of departure. Schweitzer concentrated upon the initial stage of the development of dogma through Jesus and Paul. Building on this, subsequent development has been reconstructed, notably, by M. Werner. In the 'elucidation of the inner causes of Hellenisation', Werner argues, we need some overall understanding of the ministry and message of Jesus and the thought of Paul which may serve as our point of departure.

Recently F. Buri has supported Schweitzer's thesis. He upholds its recognition of the centrality of eschatology in the New Testament, of the centrality for Jesus and for Paul's thought of a temporally delimited Naherwartung and of the centrality for the life and growth of the early church of the Parousia-delay crisis. He realises that the weakest point in Schweitzer's thesis is its failure to offer any full and sustained interpretation of the Jesus of history for present faith. Schweitzer's reverence for life maxim is more practised than expounded. Buri seeks to overcome this deficiency by introducing Bultmann's hermeneutic principle of existential interpretation. 'The New Testament', he argues, 'must be understood as referring to the individual and total human situation present and future, and not—directly—to world history'. The basis of eschatology is anthropological: it is the 'will for life fulfilment' in the present, despite the discouragement of knowledge.

The essence of New Testament eschatology (he maintains) is the overcoming of knowledge by will, and this is expressed in the form of Judaic apocalyptic. But we can substitute for this form the recognition of each present moment as a creation of God, and hence we can achieve a reverence for each moment as a creation divine. The achievement of all this is precisely what the New Testament means when it speaks of being 'in Christ'.

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Werner believes that Schweitzer's thesis provides this. His own contribution may be summarised as follows: 'Jesus was wholly at one with late-Jewish apocalyptic in . . . fundamental outlook'. Because Jesus, the Apostles, Paul and the entire early church were all dominated by the conviction that the End and the Parousia of Jesus as Messiah were immediately to occur, the delay caused an enormous crisis for the church which led to:
a. falling away of many and the rise of ‘heretics’ (properly, according to Werner, self-designated ‘seekers’).

b. the abandonment of the old ‘eschatological’ understanding of the gospel.

c. the reconstruction of belief primarily in terms of Jesus’ person (originally conceived as a ‘high angelic being’) and of Jesus’ work (originally conceived eschatologically) in nonephantological categories.

Werner maintains that we must return to that situation in which the Primitive Christian faith, after the death of Jesus, found itself so involved with the problem of the continuing delay of the Parousia in an effort to perceive what the ‘present significance of this Primitive Christianity’ is, now that the content of the apocalyptic-eschatological ideas ... in their original form are no more, as such, to be reckoned as Christian truth. The task is simply sketched in three pages of postscript.

Our criticism of Consistent Eschatology is most conveniently undertaken in two areas of concern, methodology and interpretation. First, we consider methodology. Werner recognises that since Schweitzer’s day form criticism demands comment, but he concludes that where form criticism is used against Schweitzer it is, generally, wrongly turned into an historical criterion. Schweitzer, to be sure, was a forerunner of the form critics in attacking all subjective criteria of literary judgement, but he failed in that he did not apply his searching criticism of others, to himself. His literary method led him, for instance, to accept the form of the Sermon on the Mount and of the charge to the Twelve (Mtt. 10) as authentic. In both cases, form criticism—without turning itself into an historical criterion—shows us the fragmentary nature of the material.

In two important instances Schweitzer suspended his literary criterion in favour of historical presuppositions. He combined Mtt. 10 with Mk. 6, though on literary grounds this is quite unjustified, and he transferred the Transfiguration scene to a period preceding the conversation on the way to Caesarea Philippi, though there is no literary ground for doing so.

The historical criterion which Schweitzer selected ‘from within the tradition’ is the apocalyptic of contemporary Judaism. But the selection of this as the measure of the authenticity of New Testament material raises three important questions:

i. Is such a narrow and precise criterion necessary?

ii. Is its selection justified in view of the complexity of thought in contemporary Judaism?

iii. Can such a criterion allow even the possibility of any sui generis element in Jesus’ life and work?

In its application the criterion has radical effects which seem increasingly questionable. For example, Schweitzer rejects in the Synoptic material the birth narratives as unauthentic: yet there are commentators who find grounds for treating these narratives with much more respect. The fourth Gospel, on Schweitzer’s criterion, is entirely removed from material bearing on the actual life of Jesus: yet the historical value of the Fourth Gospel is being increasingly recognised. As a further example, Schweitzer’s criterion rules the 2nd Epistle to the Thessalonians as non-Pauline because ‘it explicitly opposes the idea that the return of Jesus is immediately at hand, and enumerates all that must happen before that Day can dawn (II Thess. 2, 1-12)’. The Epistle, however, can be interpreted quite adequately as Pauline.

On the basis of this historical criterion a picture of Jesus as an apocalyptic Schwärmer emerges with which certain elements of the New Testament do not accord: these elements are therefore

1 Cf. e.g. Flückiger, Ursprung, p. 25. Kümmel, Promise, pp. 62ff.

2 Mystery, p. 120. Schweitzer admits as much.

3 Cf. Werner, Formation, p. 15.

4 Cf. above, chapter 2, pp. 18ff.


8 Cf. Mysticism, p. 42.

9 As e.g. by Lauk, II Thessalonicher, pp. xff. Oepke, Thessalonicher, pp. 128ff.
designated 'later interpretation'. A first century apocalyptic Schweitzer, however, is no less an arbitrary creation than (for example) a nineteenth century Idealist, or a twentieth century Jesus of existentialism. 1 Schweitzer's antithesis between the (so-called) historical facts of the Synoptics and the (so-called) theological idealisation of the remainder of the New Testament is not a necessary antithesis. 2 Further, Werner's antithesis between Jesus and all subsequent dogma is not a necessary antithesis. 3 It is at least possible that cleavage, where it is definitely to be found, is due to alien influences rather than to any inner need for re-interpretation. 4

We turn now to criticism of interpretation. In representing apocalyptic as the dominating feature of Jesus' thought, Schweitzer omits to notice the considerable variety of expectation contained within contemporary apocalyptic writings. 5 Most significantly, the work of the Messiah is never represented in apocalyptic as 'forcing in the kingdom', and the idea of a secret life of humiliation prior to exaltation is, generally, lacking.

In selecting apocalyptic as the dominating feature of Jesus' thought world, Schweitzer neglects other prominent aspects of first century Judaism: traditionalism, for instance, amongst the Sadducees, legalism amongst the Pharisees and syncretism where Hellenistic influence thrived. Schweitzer himself noted the inadequacy of apocalyptic in interpreting Jesus' thought, but only conceded that Jesus combined with it the older prophetic ethic. 6 The New Testament contains hints (at least) that apocalyptic was not the all dominating factor either in Jesus' thought or in the contemporary situation, which Schweitzer imagined it to be. The common people, for example, who both 'heard Jesus gladly' (Mk. 12, 37) and who 'went out unto 'John the Baptist 'and were baptised of him, confessing their sins' (Mk. 1, 5) are never represented as acclaiming the Baptist as 'Messiah', 7 nor do they suggest that Jesus is more than a 'John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets' (Mk. 8, 28). Had apocalyptic had such a general, dominating influence, it is difficult to understand why John was held only as a prophet, and neither he nor Jesus attracted messianic acclaim. 8 The disciples, too, do not appear to have been entirely bound by apocalyptic speculation. Matthew 6 ταλαντάς (Mtt. 10, 3), for instance, would have had little in common with the Pharisees amongst whom apocalyptic most probably had some favour. Simon the Zealot (Lk. 6, 15, Acts 1, 13), or δέικτος (Mk. 3, 18. Mtt. 10, 4) was a member of the political zealot group, and others (Judas Iscariot, Simon Peter, the two sons of Zebedee) might perhaps have been; 9 according to our survey of this group, its aims were primarily political, its interest quite different from apocalyptic. Jesus himself, also, though most likely influenced by apocalyptic, would hardly have attended only to this pressure. It is clear that he would have been to synagogue services from childhood 8 and must have been thoroughly familiar with the Pentateuch and Prophets through the lessons, and with Rabbinic Targumim through the sermons. 10 Surely, these will have influenced him too.

It is specially questionable whether apocalyptic can prove an adequate key in probing Jesus' self-understanding. Difficulties clearly arise in interpreting the (so-called) messianic secret. In Schweitzer's view the secret consists in Jesus' belief that he was Messiah-designate. 7 This, he argues, is a secret 'of necessity' because it is inexpressible. 8 Yet Schweitzer's thesis of a double consciousness, which he propounds as a rationale of the secret, 9 might be expected to have served as a medium for its communication. 10

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1 Cf. Cullmann, Unzeitgemässe Bemerkungen, pp. 266ff.
2 Cf. Burkitt's preface to the English Quest, and G. Seaver's unsuccessful criticism of this (in Schweitzer, p. 201).
3 One need only compare the entirely positive evaluation of the rise of Christian dogma in terms of the elucidation of its inherent significance in Jesus' person and work, in accord with his own self-understanding, offered by Turner, Pattern, to see how arbitrary and self-imposed are these antitheses.
4 Cf. Cullman, 'Das Wahre', pp. 171ff. who cites the lack of discernment of the continuing work of the Holy Spirit as one cause.
5 Cf. above, chapter 2, pp. 18ff.
7 Neither in the N.T. nor in Josephus.
8 Even if the Entry into Jerusalem is understood (with many commentators) as openly messianic, this is not necessarily contradicted: but it is possible that the event was not so understood by the bystanders: cf. Cranfield, Mark, pp. 354ff.
10 Cf. Cranfield, Mark, p. 275.
16 Schweitzer's argument runs:

a. The secret is inexpressible, hence it is a secret.
Further, it is this secret which, according to Schweitzer, Judas betrayed: apparently he was able to express it. In fact there is no justification in the Synoptics for holding that this is what Judas betrayed. Moreover, the variety and character of terms used or accepted by Jesus regarding his self-consciousness. Chief of these is his characteristic self-designation Son of Man. The present and future usages of this can be reconciled if we say, not ‘Jesus expected to be revealed as the Son of Man when the Kingdom dawned’, but rather, ‘Jesus as Son of Man already (though now in humiliation) expected to be revealed as Son of Man in glory’. Perhaps, too, Jesus saw his work in the light of the Servant of Deutero-Isaiah. In the Baptism narrative (Mk. 1, I par.) the baš-ḥālôh contains an allusion to Is. 43, 9. The voice from heaven ... comes to Jesus as a summons to accept the task of the one who is addressed in the future usages of this can be reconciled if we say, not ‘Jesus expected to be revealed as the Son of Man when the Kingdom dawned’, but rather, ‘Jesus as Son of Man already (though now in humiliation) expected to be revealed as Son of Man in glory’. Schweitzer maintained that Jesus became conscious at his baptism of his status as Messiah-designate: the baš-ḥālôh, however, ‘confirms his already existing filial consciousness’. The Transfiguration, similarly, is not a revelation of his status as Messiah-designate, but a confirmation of his Sonship. It is as Son that the demons recognise him (Mk. 5, 7, 3, 11, etc.). It is as ‘Christ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ Εὐαγγελίου’ that he is condemned (Mk. 14, 61 par.).

Other designations such as Rabbi, Master, Prophet, which other people used of Jesus and which were not altogether repudiated by him, suggest that Jesus was able to create impressions familiar to diverse traditions in Jewish life and thought, and was apparently not unwilling to do so. All these terms indicate that Jesus saw himself as more than Messiah-designate. The terms of Apocalyptic

1 This is contested by e.g. Flew, Church, pp. 103f. But a consciousness of vicarious suffering in the establishment of a new covenant seems most probably to be present in Jesus’ words.
2 Of which Cullmann, Christology, p. 65 writes, ‘Here we have the central theme of the ebed Jahweh hymns, and this is a clear allusion to Is. 53, 5. It is as if Jesus said, “The Son of Man came to fulfil the task of the ebed Jahweh”.
4 Cranfield, Mark, p. 55.
5 Some of these passages seem to draw the Servant and the Son together. At the baptism the baš-ḥālôh might be said to confirm a filial consciousness in a context of dedication to the mission of the servant. In the case of the Transfiguration, the confirmation of Sonship is linked, at least in Luke, to the mission of suffering (cf. Ἠσυχίαν ἔχον αὐτοῦ, δὲ ἐμαυλεῖς πληροῖν): cf. also Mt. 11, 25-30 where an expression of filial consciousness is followed by a passage (vv. 28-30) reminiscent of the mission of the Servant (cf. esp. ‘for I am meek and lowly’ Is. 50, 6, 53, 5f.).
6 We may note also such references as Mt. 12, 42 = Lk. 11, 31. Mt. 13, 16. Lk. 10, 21ff. Mt. 19, 16ff. = Lk. 18, 18f (where Jesus’ answer couples, as on a par, obedience to the commandments and allegiance to himself). Mk. 2, 6ff., where, even if the term Son of Man is a gloss (cf. Rawlinson, Mark, ad loc. Taylor, Mark, ad loc. Cranfield, Mark ad loc.) the proclamation of forgiveness cannot be questioned; here—if not blasphemy (the answer of
are also seen to be insufficient, and the future tense not comprehensive enough, to express Jesus’ consciousness of his own person and work.

When Jesus’ self-consciousness is understood in wider terms then the secret of his person becomes intelligible, and is better formulated as the Son of God secret. It consists in the fact that ‘God was in Christ’ (II Cor. 5, 19); in him was the Eschaton—yet not in glorious majesty but in the form of a servant ‘to save his people from their sins’ (Mtt. 1, 21; Mk. 2, 6). It arises from the fact that Jesus, Son of God assumes the role and mission of the Servant, and it is sustained in order that the divine mystery of election (of ‘calling’ and of ‘faith’) might be operative. Contrary to Schweitzer’s thesis, Jesus did not seek to force in the Kingdom but declared it to be present already in his own person and work (we shall have to expand on this later).

Jesus’ death can hardly be interpreted (as Schweitzer wishes) as meaning for Jesus ‘saving others from the Messianic woes’. Apocalyptic expectation does not anticipate such a Messianic work. If ἀποκατάστασις is to be identified as meaning ἱστορία (in Mk. 10, 43) a sin-offering, then the matter is even more definite, for nowhere in the gospels or in late Jewish apocalyptic is the bearing of Messianic woes referred to as a sin-offering; and precisely in the context of Mk. 10, 43 the Messianic woes are not mentioned. It is, surely, because Schweitzer’s interpretation underemphasises the grace-motif in Jesus’ death that he resorts to his thesis of reverence for his own glorification. We shall argue that apparent references following his death (the End, involving the general resurrection motif in Jesus’ death that he resorts to his thesis of reverence for Schweitzer’s interpretation underemphasises the grace-motif of Jesus’ life and work is seen to be continued and made effectual in the grace-character of the interim. Divorced, as in Schweitzer’s thesis, from such a soteriology, the expectation of an interval must be quite incomprehensible.

The reconstruction of Paul’s thought in terms of consistent eschatology is questionable at many points. Werner (less cautiously than Schweitzer) maintains that Paul held Jesus to be an angelic power. To be sure, a certain subordination of the Son to the Father is present (cf. e.g. I Cor. 15, 28). But an angel Christology, as such, seems to be excluded by, for example, Phil. 2, 6 ff. Rom. 8, 37-39, etc. The appellation κόσμος could conceivably reflect the occasional apocalyptic usage with reference to angels, but is much more likely to follow the frequent usage of the Old Testament in connection with God; δὲ κόσμος, never used in the Old Testament or in apocalyptic literature of an angel, is on the other hand the well-used expression for God. Other titles with a wealth of significance are applied to Jesus in the New Testament and these must influence our understanding of any ‘angel’ category of interpretation.

Schweitzer and Werner claim that Paul understood Jesus’ death and resurrection as the initiation of the End of the world, and that he saw Jesus’ resurrection as the literal beginning of to a speedy coming of the End do not necessitate this view and that there is evidence that Jesus expected a Zwischenzeit and made provision for such. Schweitzer appears to allow one group of references (which he interprets as forecasting a speedy End) to rule out another group (which might be taken as indicating an interval between the End) and this is an instance of quite unsatisfactory ‘monist’ thinking. Taken in conjunction with the soteriological interpretation of Jesus’ mission and death, the provision of an interim in which the call to repentance and faith is made possible, is entirely intelligible. The grace-motif of Jesus’ life and work is seen to be continued and made effectual in the grace-character of the interim. Divorced, as in Schweitzer’s thesis, from such a soteriology, the expectation of an interval must be quite incomprehensible.

The scribes— is an indication of the presence of the final rule of God (cf. Schniewind, Markus, p. 23).


2 Flückiger, Ursprung, p. 38 (and note 57) rightly argues that even in terms of apocalyptic such a mission is unthinkable.

3 Cf. Michaelis, Zur Engelchristologie, pp. 61ff.


6 The evacuation of a gospel motif is found also in late Jewish apocalyptic (cf. Enoch 98, 10, 33, 2, 60, 6, 62, 9, II Esdras 5, 17f.).
the general resurrection. Werner\(^1\) finds this especially in Gal. 6, 14. But, as Flückiger\(^2\) says, there is no mention here of a process nor of an immediate continuation.\(^3\) Contrary to Schweitzer Paul seems to have expected not the completion of a process, although the present involves a process of events—in individual believers (cf. Rom. 13, 11ff.), in the church (cf. II Cor. 10, 16. Rom. 9-21), and in the world (cf. Rom. 8, 20. II Thess. 2). He rather contrasts past hidden events\(^4\) with their expected future unveiling: the undeniable manifestation of the One in whom the End events have occurred—hence he awaits Jesus himself, and 'in glory'.\(^5\)

The contention that at certain points in the Epistles we find Paul's confident belief that the End must come within a short and limited period must be discussed later.\(^6\) To anticipate our argument, we suggest that whilst Paul regarded the speedy return of Christ as a real possibility, he nowhere maintained it as certain or necessary, either in his early letters or in his late ones.

Consistent Eschatology concludes that the delay of the Parousia created a total, crucial and indeed fatal crisis in the life of the early church.\(^7\) This, however, elevates one single area of thought into the central problem of the church and ignores a welter of problems concerning faith and life (much more deserving to be termed 'crises') which faced the church in its early years, and in the light of which the development of dogma should also be viewed. Fore-

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1. Formation, p. 73.
2. Ursprung, p. 49.
3. Flückiger, Ursprung, p. 49 writes, 'Allerdings scheint Werner der Meinung zu sein, dass Paulus diese Katastrophe für ein sehr langsam fortschreitendes Geschehen angesehen habe, da der Galaterbrief immerhin zwei Jahrzehnte nach der Passion Jesu abgefasst worden ist, zu welcher Zeit eine Verwandlung der Welt noch nicht erkennbar war. Vorsichtig redet er dann auch nur von einem "Beginn" der kosmischen Endereignisse, ob schon Gal. 6, 14 mit keinem Wort auf eine blosse beginnende Handlung schliessen lässt.'
6. Cf. below, pp. 103ff.
8. Cf. e.g. Phil. 2, 6ff. Cullmann, Confessions, passim.
9. Turner, Pattern, pp. 20 ff. Cf. p. 22, 'There are more points of contact between the N.T. and the later church than he (Werner) seems to allow.'
community in its entirety attached firm importance to the present as having an especial place in the total salvation-history.

Consistent Eschatology must further reckon with the difficulty that in spite of being founded (apparently) upon disappointment, the church—to a greater or lesser extent, here and there, and from time to time—continued to live and suffer, to work and witness in a way hardly consistent with such an origin and foundation. Schweitzer and Werner think that disappointment led to Hellenisation. But it is at least possible that Hellenisation came about through 'human faithlessness', which is also an adequate explanation of the loss of expectancy in the church's faith and life.¹

Few writers would deny the value of the impulse given to New Testament study by Schweitzer and other exponents of Consistent Eschatology. Nor would they deny the necessity of taking seriously the eschatology of the New Testament. But the narrowness and one-sidedness of the methodology involved and of the interpretation offered is very apparent.² The expectation of apocalyptic (certainly as Schweitzer understands it) cannot do justice to the soteriological understanding of Jesus' life and death which we find throughout the New Testament. Nor can it account for the fact that in spite of hope such as we find expressed in Acts 1, 6, the early church neither awaited whatever the future should hold with an abandonment of present responsibilities, nor did it die out its 'natural' way, as other disillusioned enthusiastic movements did.

¹ Cullmann, in K.r.S. XI, 1942.
² Cf. Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, pp. 34ff.