
Pro Rege

Volume 20 | Number 3

Article 2

March 1992

Of Heaven and History: The Verticalist Eschatology of Geerhardus Vos

Michael Williams
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Williams, Michael (1992) "Of Heaven and History: The Verticalist Eschatology of Geerhardus Vos," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 20: No. 3, 9 - 18.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol20/iss3/2

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Of Heaven and History: The Verticalist Eschatology of Geerhardus Vos



by Michael Williams

The middle-aged accountant lays plans for her retirement in Arizona. A young couple scrimps and saves, hoping that one day they will be able to purchase a house. A college student studies toward a career in architectural design. All of us hope and aspire for the future, and that future shapes our attitudes and decisions in the present. Saving for a home, planning a retirement, or preparing for a career are goals we set for our present existence. They are penultimate goals. When we look to the ultimate future, however, we often think of human destiny.

Dr. Michael Williams is Assistant Professor of Theology at Dordt College.

A primary dimension of our humanity is that we humans live our lives in terms of our projected futures; and that is as true of what we see to be our ultimate future as it is of our approximate futures. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” he was voicing his realization that human beings live their lives according to their hopes and expectations concerning the future. Thus, how Christians understand the future, what is called Eschatology, is no mere exegetical and dogmatic concern. It is also a worldview concern. Our understanding of what God will do in the future, our understanding of eschatology, has worldview implications and is itself heavily impacted by our worldviews.

The Eschatological Framework of Vos’s Theology

Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949) was a pioneer in what has since become a fundamental principle of New Testament theology, namely, that Christianity is an eschatological religion. He began to speak in such terms as early as 1900. Following the datum that “Christianity in its very origin bears an eschatological character,”¹ Vos naturally concluded that eschatology could no longer be merely an appendix to dogmatics, no longer a mere concluding postscript. Rather, Vos asserted, “Eschatology has as much claim to [be] the centerpiece of Christianity as does Christology or Soteriology.”²

Vos did not merely emphasize eschatology so that it might join other dogmatic concerns on an equal footing; he recast his theology so as to make the understanding of Christianity fundamentally

eschatological. To Vos, christology is eschatological; soteriology is eschatological. He believed that the eschatological character of Christianity permeates and vivifies Christian existence. In his view, the present Christian life, not only its future hope, is eschatological. The church's consciousness of its eschatological context arises because she realizes she has incompletely appropriated redemption, because she is aware that we are not yet what we will one day be.³

This consciousness, according to Vos, led the early church to associate the eschaton with a normative and determinative state of affairs which, while belonging to a yet future consummation of the Day of the Lord, nevertheless impinges upon present Christian existence.

The ultimate things were brought forward in their consciousness, in order that in the light of these they might learn the better to understand the provisional and preparatory. For the ultimate is in a very important sense the normative, that to which every preceding stage will have to conform itself to prove the genuineness of its Christian character. (PE 42)

Thus the hope of the eschaton pervaded and regulated the early Christian community. Its understanding of Christ as Consummator shaped the early church's self-understanding as the eschatological community. This eschatological orientation did not, however, sever the church's covenantal relationship to the past. Rather, the very eschatological, forward looking, character of Christianity precludes any ahistorical lopping off of the church's grounding in covenantal history. Vos understood the New Testament's historical contextualization of eschatology in such a way that he could say that "eschatology is preeminently historical."

Vos was among the first in the Reformed tradition to attend to the significance of the fact that God's redemptive revelation organically unfolds in history. He has, therefore, and quite rightly, been called "the father of a Reformed biblical theology" (SW xiv).

Vos understood the content of biblical revelation as essentially historical, rather than doctrinal. The Bible, therefore, evinces a redemptive-historical content, a content centered on the God who acts. To Vos, "revelation follows events."

In [the progressive character of revelation] the all important thing is that God has acted in the past, is acting in the present, and promises to

act in the future. Those who live under it always look back into the past, that is to say, their piety has a solid basis of tradition. Even when desiring to make progress they do not believe in the possibility of real, healthy progress without continuity with the past . . . Their contentedness is not of the superficial kind, such would interfere with profound expectation from the future. At the same time they do not depend for the progress in the future on their own acquired potencies or powers, but on the same supernatural interposition and activity of God, which have produced the present out of the past. Biblical religion is thoroughly eschatological in its outlook.⁴

Biblical history takes place in the context of the typologically patterned acts of God. Thus the historical pattern of promise and fulfillment at one and the same time constitutes the real continuity of Scripture and anticipates a continuity with God's eschatological promises. Biblical revelation has an historically progressive character, which cannot be considered whole or sufficient apart from its eschatological aspect.⁵

The Eschatological Tension of Christianity

Vos's eschatological understanding of Christianity takes as an historical given that the present exists in tension with the eschaton. This "eschatological dualism" (PE 297) is particularly evident in Paul, whose thought betrays a decidedly "antithetical structure." "The antithesis is between a world (age) that is and a world (age) that is to come. The point of view is dramatic, the new being the outcome and termination of the forces of supernatural history propelling towards it in the old" (PE 36). The present age passes away so that another might take its place. This present *chronos* moves aside to make way for a new order of reality. Vos's linear view of history is not merely convenient or purely formal. Rather, it sweepingly includes the entire expanse of history. "It acquires the character of the most dramatic realism. It is drama, and besides that, drama hastening on with accelerated movement to the point of denouement and consummation" (PE 26).

Biblical religion is frankly pessimistic concerning the present world, according to Vos. The New Testament is acutely aware of the sinfulness of this present age between the two advents of Jesus Christ.

And that consciousness irresistibly calls forth the eschatological deliverance. This age is hopelessly involved in sin and evil, and therefore stands under both the judgment of God and the divine promise of the age to come. Without the hope of a future world, a better world, the present is doomed to skepticism and meaninglessness. This present world, or age, calls up evil associations: Satan is "the god of this *aion*." *Kosmos* as well as *aion* have an evil denotation "when used in ethico-religious connections" (PE 13).

An absolute separation makes the age to come discrete from the present age, for the latter constitutes a new mode of existence, "a new system of reality." The age to come is a sphere of existence that is *kata pneuma* (according to the Spirit), and it represents an antithesis to the present state of affairs which is *kata sarka* (according to the flesh). The church, however, finds itself living "between the times," or in both ages at once. As the eschatological community, the church has been transported into the age to come even while it yet proclaims the kingdom of God in this present age. Thus, the church lives in two ages at once, the age of the Spirit as well as the age of the flesh.

Redemption and Eschatology

The age to come is proleptically anticipated and brought near, in the present, by the resurrection of Christ, "the womb of the new aeon." The great eschatological drama has begun and the church is already the recipient, at least partially, of the blessings and privileges of the eschaton. We may say that the future determines and shapes the present, for in Christ "the light of the world to come casts its clarifying and glorifying radiance backward into the present" (PE 43). The Christian moves backward in his thought from the anticipated consummation to the present, and interprets the present in terms of the future.

Redemption, then, is the eschatological act of God that proleptically impinges upon our present lives. Eschatology shapes soteriology for Vos. "The eschatological appears as predeterminative of both the substance and form of the soteriological" (PE 60). The fact that in Scripture's acute sense of the pervasiveness of sin it anchors its hope in the future action of God explains "why the New Testament doctrine of salvation has grown up to a large extent in the closest interaction with its eschatological

teaching" (PE 26). As the believer is redeemed in the future, so is he redeemed in the present. He presently possesses a foretaste of the future state. Present redemption is a proleptic effect produced by the inbreaking of the world to come upon those who live in the present world. *Soteria* (salvation) is spoken of, especially in Paul, in such an absolute, eschatological fashion that the only possible conception of the term is eschatological. Thus, Vos interprets Paul's denotation of salvation as "deliverance from the wrath to come" (SW 93).

The eschatological consummation breaks into the present and manifests its power by transforming the believer into a new creature in Christ, changing his

Biblical religion is frankly pessimistic concerning the present world, according to Vos. This present world, this age, calls up evil associations: Satan is "the god of this aion."

inner orientation, perspective, or religious allegiance. Thus the blessings of the age to come do not constitute a present, this-worldly phenomenon, but are realized at present only in the spiritual realm. Hence they belong to the present *de jure* manifestation of the kingdom of God.

Eschatology and soteriology are so interrelated in Vos's thought that, for him, "a redemptive religion without eschatological interest would be a contradiction in terms." The very frequency of the phrase *aionios zoe* (eternal life) shows how fully the New Testament envisioned normative life as pre-eminently eschatological life. Eschatology and soteriology intersect at the two great final events of the eschatological drama: resurrection and judgment. Justification is the anticipation of the last judgment upon the Christian as well as the future summing up of a world ruled by sin. The resurrection is the restoration of that which has fallen prey to the dominion of sin.

The Kingdom of God

The age to come unfolds itself as the kingdom of God. The kingdom is a thoroughly theocentric im-

age for Vos. God both produces the kingdom and forms its foundation. The kingdom reflects God, its King. The kingdom in Vos's conception is not to be construed as the premier eschatological image. Many have made it so, due largely to the great weight that Jesus put on the image. But Jesus' emphasized the kingdom of God only because he had a theocentric consciousness. It is not Jesus' teaching on the kingdom but his conception of God as king and father that dominated his own consciousness.⁶

Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God. The "repent ye" which precedes that proclamation points to the eschatological judgment by which the kingdom is to be consummated. The message of the kingdom, then, is an eschatological message. That is to say, the kingdom is essentially an eschatological state of affairs. The early Christian community believed that even though the Messiah had sojourned in history with them, and they experienced the kingdom as a present reality, the principal and normative appearance of the kingdom of God belonged to the future. According to Vos, *parousia* denotes "being present" as well as "becoming present." Thus, *parousia* means making Christ present, and where the king is present, there also is the kingdom.

The present kingdom and the future kingdom are not two different kingdoms for Vos. The kingdom comes as two aspects, or two comings: an imminent, spiritual-organic coming, and a yet future coming at the end of the age. We should not understand these two aspects of the kingdom as logically or historically exclusive of one another. The organic kingdom initiates and progresses into the final, eschatological manifestation of the kingdom. The difference between the two aspects or stages of the kingdom is that the same divine power at work through the ages effects the present manifestation of the kingdom and will also bring about the final stage of the kingdom at the eschatological consummation. The kingdom at present has an organic, gradual, spiritual existence while the eschatological kingdom will appear instantaneously, and will draw the entire physical universe within the sphere of its power and dominion.

The kingdom comes by supernatural, divine action in both its aspects. It appears as a supernatural process taking place in two stages. The kingdom inaugurated by Jesus Christ develops gradually but is concluded by crisis. The organic, progressive ac-

tivity of God in the present spiritual kingdom produces no absolute or perfect results because it is relativized by the realities of a fallen humanity and a physical world groaning under sin. The final, catastrophic act of God overturns those forces opposing God's kingdom rule, and it corrects any deficiencies in the present kingdom. Thus, the future kingdom of God issues forth in a new heavens and a new earth. This end-time crisis, this "abrupt eschatology," is necessary because even the most persistent application of the power of the present kingdom cannot usher in the promised new heavens and new earth. Conversion neither produces sinlessness in people nor eradicates abnormalities that result from sin. The universe stands in need of an eschatological and soteric transformation that is simultaneously ethical and structural.

When or under what circumstances then does the present kingdom issue forth into the new. Or better, when does the coming kingdom break into the old? Vos writes:

While we cannot expect the gradual development of the spiritual Kingdom to pass over automatically into the final state, there is nevertheless a fixed connection between the stage the former shall have reached at a certain point (known only to God), and the sudden super-vention of the latter. The best confirmation of this principle is taught in the parable of the imperceptibly growing seed. The wheat grows up gradually, while the man sleeps and rises night and day, and he knows not how. But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest is come (Mk. 4:26-29). The condition of ripeness in the grain determines the arrival of the harvest, but the grain cannot harvest itself; for that the interposition of the sickle is required. (SW 300)

The Redemptive Kingdom

The kingdom of God is the comprehensive term for all that the messianic salvation includes. The reign of God is a reign of saving grace. The entire complex of blessing and glory that will characterize the age to come is subsumed under the kingdom image. The kingdom of God is the instrument of divine liberating, healing, and saving. That power, the power which establishes the kingdom, finds its source in the Holy Spirit. Because the present

kingdom anticipates God's future kingdom, the endowment and influence of the Spirit, which creates the very environment of the future state, is a constituent of the present kingdom as well. The presence and work of the Spirit provides the continuity between the two aspects of the kingdom. He is "the connecting link between the mode of the believer's life on earth and that in the age to come in heaven. Thus it may become clear to us how the first-fruits and the harvest can be identical in character" (PE 301).

The kingdom of God is a kingdom of life. "The kingdom and life are interchangeable conceptions" (SW 314). Jesus equates entrance into the kingdom with entrance into new life in John 3:5. The life referred to is redeemed life, and therefore, primarily the life of the age to come. "The future blessedness emerges as 'life' par excellence" (PE 405). As to the present phase of the kingdom, the blessings of future salvation are largely forensic. Righteousness as it is biblically applied to the believer during the present age is a good example. The righteousness mentioned in Matthew 6:33 is seen by Vos as God's juridical and forensic appointment of his own moral glory to the believer.

The final restoration knows a wider scope than that of Christianity's ethical activity or even the inner life of the soul. The appearance of the coming kingdom is more than a mere rendering of the blessings of the kingdom in a more visible and concrete form. In the eschatological restoration, "all imperfections will be done away with, all enemies vanquished, the wheat and the tares will no longer be permitted to intermingle, the full satisfaction with righteousness and the beatific vision of God will be enjoyed" (SW 309). Present internal or ethical processes cannot produce this effect. Only the eschatological kingdom can bring the full blessings and privileges of the kingdom to fruition.

An Assessment of Vos's Eschatological Approach

Vos's rethinking of eschatology is commendable in many ways. His emphasis upon the eschatological nature of the Christian religion was truly epochal. Vos reclaimed eschatology from the sectarian periphery to which it had been relegated since the fourth century. For thinkers as diverse as Herman Ridderbos in The Netherlands and George Ladd, an American evangelical Baptist, Vos had brought

eschatology into the front parlor of theology, indeed into the very center of the theological enterprise. God speaks from the future as well as from the primal past. We may say that our present is the intersection of covenantal history and God's future. Likewise, we can draw much from Vos's insistence that biblical revelation is historical, that it progressively unfolds as God's redemptive word. Today we take it for granted that the Bible did not appear as a flat and ahistorical document from the heavens. The Bible is an historical revelation to historical men and women. Vos was also instrumental in bringing the connection between the Holy Spirit and eschatology to light. This is especially

According to Vos, the blessings of the age to come do not constitute a present, this-worldly phenomenon, but are realized at present only in the spiritual realm.

important in Reformed circles, for we have traditionally been remiss in pneumatology, except as it comes to bear upon epistemology.

Vos contributes most, however, in recognizing the eschatological tension brought about by the divine incision into history in Christ. While the church abides in this present age, it also belongs to, and lives in, the age to come. The powers that will transform the cosmos and bring about the future kingdom of God are *already* in motion, even though they are *not yet* completely present. Jesus is the eschatological man. His resurrection is the first-fruits of the general, eschatological resurrection. In the first advent of Christ, the kingdom of God entered into our midst, and the final eschatological drama began. In short, a biblical eschatology, if it is to be faithful and adequate, must address the present as well as the future blessed hope.

Vos's Dualism

Do we, however, find a suitable foundation for an adequate biblical eschatology in Vos? Can those of us who stand within the same confessional tradition in which he stood find in him the building blocks of a Reformed understanding of eschatology,

aside from the insights noted above? Sadly, I think not. Above the historical, worldly sphere in which God works out his divine purpose for his creation, Vos placed a vertical tension, a nature-supernature dualism. To his credit, he wanted to speak of the act of God in historical terms, but unfortunately he subsumed that vision to a neoplatonism that forced him to speak a metaphysical language, a language in which he could not translate his historical concerns. When spoken in the language of transcendentalist metaphysics, the word of the blessed hope is not eschatology at all, but in reality a radical verticalization of that future hope.

If the future holds the hermeneutic clues to the present, if eschatology is to be regarded as the rightful norm and exemplar of present Christian experience, what content are we to understand the *eschaton*, the age to come, to have? By what paradigm do we interpret the eschatological state of affairs? Vos proceeds here by way of the image of *heaven*. Heaven is the ideal, the paradigm by which all other states of existence are to be judged and compared. "Heaven is also, as the abode of God, in relation to earth the ideal pattern to which all things here below ought to conform" (*SW* 306). Heaven is not only the sphere of regulation and limitation impinging upon the phenomenal, it is the storehouse of divine power, the gathering point of divine influence upon this material world.

When one becomes aware of the centrality of heaven in Vos's "transcendental form of eschatology," his use of such terms as "other-worldliness," and what he means when he says that "eschatology is supernaturalism to the nth degree" (*PE* 62) become clear. Vos can hold that the earthly anticipation of the *eschaton* is already realized in heaven because the glorified Christ is in heaven, and he is the agent of the future age. Those things that pertain to the celestial realm, the invisible, and the spiritual, are the theater of the *eschaton* "in the highest sense." As heaven finds its reason in God, so too does the future, albeit by heavenly mediation.

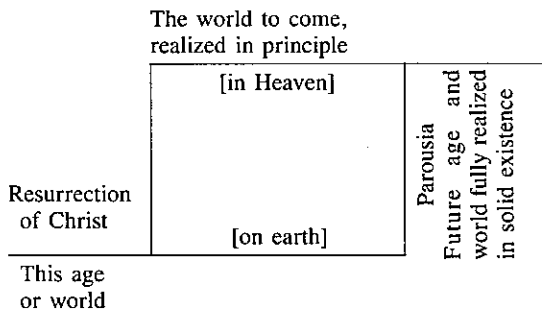
The age to come lies above the present evil age. This future elevation is more than merely directional or moral. The age to come is an entirely different mode of reality than the phenomenal. The *eschaton* is "a state of things lying altogether above the sphere of earthly and natural life, being so different from the natural conditions that it could not be

evolved from the latter by any gradual process" (*SW* 307). We see then how Vos uses *age* and *world* in a dual sense. Age/world can be applied to either a future time or a totally different state of affairs standing alongside of, or "above" the present physical universe. Vos transforms age/world from the temporal usage (which we have already noted) into a spatial, metaphysical category. In this way he preserves temporal succession but can apply the *eschaton* to the present. While he uses *age* and *world* almost interchangeably, he understands the two terms to carry a somewhat different weight. Thus, while Vos speaks equally in terms of "the age to come" or "the future world," he limits his language to "the world above" while *never* referring to "the age above." Vos explains:

This principle did not allow of application to the age-concept, for the two sequences of time are mutually exclusive. So long as one age lasts no other can supervene. "It is different with regards to worlds or states, for here the existence of one does not include the contemporary existence of another, and there is nothing logically impossible either in the believer's belonging to both or at least preeminently to one rather than to the other. And what was logically possible became practically unavoidable through the shifting of the center of gravity from the lower to the higher sphere, as brought about by the removal of the Messiah to the higher world and his abiding there in permanence. (*PE* 37; cf. 12, 46-7, 59)

The Christian's transfer of his hopes and aspirations, as well as his citizenship and rightful domicile, has a Christological basis. Being "in Christ," the believer is raised up with Christ and made to sit with him in the heavens. Thus the future expectation of the Christian enjoys an upward movement. Quite simply, Vos equates the world/age to come with heaven. The eschatological new creation is heavenly or otherworldly. The duality here is not merely that the believer lives "between the times," that is to say, in the present as well as the age to come, but also that while he sojourns here below he has his real life, his very citizenship in heaven. When the Christian is ushered into the *eschaton* and receives the full possession of the Spirit of God he will also possess "the life of heaven." The age to come is none other than "the final 'celestial state'" (*PE* 10; cf. *SW* 422).

Thus we see that for Vos the age to come is other-worldly. The movement toward the future is the movement toward the world above. Vos gives us a time line which demonstrates most clearly that the eschaton is a heavenly plane, elevated above and distinct from this world (PE 38).



Identifying the eschaton with a heavenly realm results for Vos, as it did for Augustinian amillennialism, in a verticalization of eschatology that in reality defuses the power of the eschaton in a beatific vision. The *eschaton* is thus subsumed in the Christian's immediate, upward gaze. When the vision of the eschaton is realized upon the entrance of the Christian into heaven at death, the future perspective dominated by the resurrection of the body and a new creation must be regarded as of negligible importance.⁷ The biblical message of eschatological renewal is annulled by a heavenly hope. The church looks for eternal life with Christ in heaven rather than for the renewal and restoration of God's own dear universe.

While admitting "a certain formal resemblance" between his thought and Greek dualistic thought, Vos insisted that there was an essential difference. In a sense, Vos attempts to historicize heaven. He writes:

What gives rise to misunderstanding at this point is the confusion of eschatological two-sidedness with the philosophical bisection of the universe into a higher and lower sphere. While this cosmical distinction is presupposed by the view in question, it is in no wise identical with it. The heaven in which the Christian by anticipation dwells is not the cosmical heaven, it is a thoroughly redemptive heaven. (PE 40)

Thus Vos tries to give a teleological outlook to his transcendental eschatology. This is a most difficult point in his thought, for it appears only once and

nowhere gives evidence of being an operational principle. Throughout the balance of his work, the vertical dimension dominates, subjecting the horizontal to itself, for heaven is the uncreated, eternal abode of God. In fact, Vos's attempt to synthesize the temporal and the spatial only makes matters worse, for his words imply that the redemptive act of Christ finds its true object solely in heaven.

Because he is pessimistic about present existence, Vos is sensitive to the charge of gnostic world flight. Vos believes that he shields himself from the charge of holding a primal ontological dualism by his understanding of God as the Creator of the cosmos (PE 32). Yet God's relationship with present

*Vos's rethinking of
eschatology is commendable
in many ways. His emphasis
upon the eschatological
nature of the Christian was
truly epochal.*

phenomenal existence remains problematic due to Vos's tendency to reductionistically associate God with the age to come, the kingdom of God, heaven. The primary sphere of divine influence and interest is heaven. This is more than the classical ontological distinction between Creator and creation. A hierarchical, metaphysical principle rules here. The created universe is not the fit medium through which to experience one's relationship with God. "It is inherent in religion to seek the highest and closest approach to God," and for Vos, that avenue does not include this-worldly affairs.

Following his nature-supernature dualism, Vos places temporality over against eternity, identifying them respectively with earth and heaven. The present world is "evil and transitory," while the age to come, the heaven-eschaton, is perfect and abiding. The spatial categories of Greek metaphysics swallow up and denude the fundamentally temporal categories that Vos himself draws attention to in New Testament eschatology. "The category of time is exchanged for that of space when the final state is located in or identified with heaven. The 'aionion' [ages] and the 'ouranion' [heaven] belong together and evince mutual attraction" (PE 297; cf. 292). The "restlessly-temporal" is destined

“to lose itself in the forever-undisturbable *aionion*” (PE 316; cf. 1, 6, 296). Vos’s understanding of eschatology shows that he understands time as abiding only for a time, as having a terminus. The eschaton is an unchanging static state which incorporates the character of the eternal. The abiding, unending, unchanging nature of the world to come is diametrically opposed to the present world of *chronos*. The *eschaton* is a state of existence devoid of limitation, temporality, or corruptibility. It is a sphere in which man will participate in the divine life.

We see here a depreciation of the temporal and the transitory, in short, of the very characteristics and qualities that delineate the phenomenal universe. Materiality is provisional and creation is probationary in Vos’s estimation. The provisional is culture, history, and creation. The ultimate is the realm of the transcendent. Identifying time with corruptibility and placing it over against an eternal, incorruptible heaven-eschaton is a denigration of temporality, which is nothing less than a divinely created constituent of the universe. Vos, however, has surrendered that universe into the hands of “the god of this age” in order that he might lay claim to his celestial citizenship without qualified glance.

The New Testament

Reversal

The Bible, however, does not speak with one voice as to the heavenly hope, according to Vos. Rather than seeing a spiritual-physical dichotomy in which man associates his essential existence with spirit, “the Old Testament saw the spiritual as wrapped up in the external” (SW 416; PE 362). Thus the Old Testament confined its vision to the creation and looked for God to restore to that milieu. But with the coming of Christ came the realization that it is in heaven, “on the other side of death [that] the perfectly normal and satisfying, the true life can begin.” Whereas the Old Testament associated man’s reality, his life, with the phenomenal world, the New Testament understands the really real to be the transcendent realm. Thus, with the dawning of the Christian age, we have a virtual “reversal” of the Old Testament religious consciousness and worldview. The Old Testament earthly hope is turned on its head and transformed into an eschatology of the “eternal present.”

Through the appearance or resurrection of Christ the eschatological process has been set

in motion. As soon as the direction of the actual spiritual life-contact becomes involved, the horizontal movement of thought on the time plane must give way immediately to the vertical projection of the eschatological interest into the supernal region, because there, even more than in the historical development below, the center of all religious values and forces has come to lie. (PE 37)

The New Testament revelation did not simply reinterpret the Old Testament hope. Rather it recognized that of which the prophet and psalmist had at best a cloudy glimpse, namely, a completely other sphere of reality than this phenomenal world, the heavenly city which is destined to absorb this present vale of tears. Thus the New Testament expressed that which was but suggested in the Old, a knowledge concerning the “two spheres of being which coexist from of old” (SW 28). The New Testament added a sphere of reality distinct from the world we know, instead of exeging the depth-dimension of the Old Testament. Thus Vos can speak of the kingdom of God as a new concept in the New Testament. The Old Testament had a future terrestrial hope, while the New Testament enjoyed the fuller revelation that one’s real hope lies in heaven.

Competing Voices

Vos allows his two competing sources, the biblical materials and a hierarchical metaphysical, to produce an ambivalence toward the future of this world. Following his metaphysical a priori, he states that, “the substance of the present world will not abide” (PE 209). Vos’s existential commitment is found in his metaphysical dualism rather than in the substance of biblical revelation. He does occasionally speak of God’s work in creation or providence, but when he does so it appears to be little more than a cursory bow to classical dogmatics on those topics. Neither God’s creative activity nor his providential love-care over his creation play a determinative role in Vos’s thinking. He does at times allow the biblical notion of eschatological restoration to surface, but never without a thoroughly verticalized qualification. “An annihilation of the substance of the present world is not taught. The central abode of the redeemed will be in heaven, although the renewed earth will remain accessible to them” (SW 55).

Is the physical universe eradicated, annulled by grace, or preserved? It does not really matter whether the physical universe is eradicated, annulled by grace, or preserved and purified, for Vos. The result is the same, either way. For if the earth persists into the eschaton it will not be a suitable home for the spirits who will populate the eschaton. The future resurrection of believers will provide them with a constitution wholly different from the present bodily state. "In the consummate state 'flesh and blood' will be superseded" in a pneumatic transformation (SW 421). As Steen has correctly summarized the anthropology of transcendental eschatology, the spiritual body of that state is "a non-fleshly, heavenly-adapted eternal body, sexless and unable to eat, 'like the angels,' that is eternal, supernatural" (138). The physical constitution of reality is so subordinated to the heavenly as to be of no account. The physical is literally "drunk down so as to disappear" (PE 207n1). Whether or not the earth will abide is simply unimportant here. If it does it will be as a dead planet, unsuitable for a life whose constitution is antithetical to it. Grace fully discounts nature.

In completely Augustinian fashion Vos discredits grace as restoration, for it smacks of millenarianism, a crude literalization and concretization of the biblical hope. For Vos, the idea of God recreating or restoring the universe which was the creative object of the God of Genesis is a compromise between temporality and the transcendental. Such compromise invariably depreciates the transcendent realm. "The vista of the transcendental world of heaven would have become all but effaced by the concrete shapes moving in the temporal foreground" (PE 77; cf. 277; SW 418). Following Augustine, Vos sees any synthesizing of the temporal and the transcendental to be impossible. One of the two must predominate, and that dominion must entail the absorption or eradication of the other. Vos, like Augustine, has placed his lot with the transcendent realm.

In that, at least according to Vos's metaphysical commitments, one cannot owe fealty to both creation and to God, the religious gaze is directed to the supernal regions alone. This results in feelings of ennui regarding this world, and a quiet, contemplative expectation towards the heavenly state.

The eager forward-stretching movement of the former period [the Old Testament], characterized by a certain degree of restlessness, here

gives place to a more quiet and serene attitude of contemplation of the other world and its content . . . It betokens the passing away of the acute, to some degree painful, sense of hunger as the result of the ample provisional satisfaction obtained. The partial enjoyment has rather whetted the appetite for the true food in its abundance. (PE 40)

Thus the contemplative nature-supernature problematic thoroughly abrogates the biblical vision of salvation as the restoration and renewal of creation. Eschatology culminates in the restoration of what was lost but in a new and utterly different mode of existence.

*Can those of us who stand
within the same confessional
tradition in which Vos stood
find in him the building
blocks of a Reformed
understanding of
eschatology?*

Even Vos's emphasis upon the *already* and the *not yet* of the kingdom of God is lost. The Christian no longer asks: "How long, Oh LORD?" He merely stands in awe of the heavenly glory and worships. Eschatology is reduced to doxology. Dwelling solely on the nature and glory of God elicits only doxology and quiescence. I would contend, however, that reflecting upon the acts of God as Creator, Father, and Redeemer produces response, obedience, and transformation. The latter also issues forth in worship, but the emphasis is not an abstract divine glory but the faithful, covenant keeping God of Scripture. We see here that Vos goes beyond mere hopelessness concerning life in this world, or even doubt as to whether Christianity can effect any real present renewal in this world. Vos has arrived at indifference toward the creation as it exists before its ultimate submission to the transcendent realm.

While Christian activism is not inherently wrong for Vos, it always runs the risk of losing sight of the heavenly object of the Christian religion. Thus he dismisses Christian social action as bordering on a humanistic, terrestrialization of the faith (PE 364-5; cf. 359). The kingdom of God's present theater of operation lies in the invisible, the spiritual,

and the thoroughly ethico-religious. There is no room nor fitting place for the Genesis mandate to function as God's stewards and representative within the creation.

Conclusion

Vos's rethinking of eschatology attempted to come to terms with the biblical stress upon history, the tension between the present age and the age to come. Unfortunately, he allowed a nature-supernature dualism to sidetrack that most worthy enterprise. Vos's insight that the kingdom of God is the comprehensive term for all that the messianic salvation includes is certainly correct. That salvation, however, must not be restricted to the soul of man or to some private area of life, but rather must be understood as being cosmic in scope. The goal of redemption is nothing less than the restoration of the entire cosmos (Eph. 1:9-19; Col. 1:19-20; Rom. 8:19-21; 2 Cor. 5:18-19). As Vos himself noticed, the hope of the Old Testament always includes the earth. And I would suggest that the same is true in the New Testament as well. The Old Testament nowhere presents the future hope as a bodiless, nonmaterial, or purely spiritual state of affairs. Pointing his polemical finger at Vos, Herman Ridderbos said that "the earth is the real object . . . the terrain of the eschatological drama."⁸

The this-worldly eschatology suggested by Ridderbos' comment may seem rather startling coming from a Reformed theologian. After all, Reformed theology has tended in the main to follow Augustine in his amillennialist (nonmaterialistic) eschatology. Remember that in *The City of God*, Book 20.7, Augustine described the view of a this-worldly eschaton as "gross, and fit for none but carnal men to believe."⁹ Vos's eschatology was fully in keeping with Augustine's amillennialism, yet it was Vos's exegetical inquiries into the

eschatological tension between this age and the age to come that enabled later theologians like Oscar Cullmann, Herman Ridderbos, Anthony Hoekema, and even the premillennialist George Ladd, to take real, significant strides toward a restorational eschatology.

NOTES

- 1 See Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, Richard B. Gaffin Jr., ed., (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reform- ed, 1980) 25. (Hereafter cited as SW).
- 2 Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 [originally published, 1930]) 29. (Hereafter cited as *PE*). Without affirming the christological tendencies of Weiss and Schweitzer, Vos credited their efforts in bringing the eschatological character of Christianity to the fore (*PE* 524).
- 3 "The interest attaching to [last things], if not wholly, yet most frequently, arises from the desire to see 'perfected' what has begun, a desire fully justified both from a theological and a practical point of view. At bottom, of course, the desire springs and gathers momentum from the habitual consciousness of the Christian state as an unfinished state with which the protracted abode of the church in this world, and our life under the preliminary conditions have familiarized but not satisfied us" (*PE* 42).
- 4 Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) 80. (Hereafter cited as *BT*).
- 5 "Where religion entwines itself around a progressive work of God, such as redemption, its general responsiveness becomes prospective, cumulative, climactic; it gravitates with all its inherent weight toward the end" (*PE* 335).
- 6 Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951) 11. (Hereafter cited as *KC*).
- 7 See Peter J. Steen, "The Problem of Time and Eternity in its Relation to the Nature-Grace Ground-Motive," in John Kraay and Anthony Tol (eds.), *Hearing and Doing* (Toronto: Wedge, 1979) 139.
- 8 Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 535, fn. 132.
- 9 Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, 2 Vols. (New York: Dutton, 1945).