

Preaching *Apokatastasis*: St. Isaac the Syrian and the Grammar of the Kingdom

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How do we preach the gospel of Jesus Christ as *good news*, as news that converts, liberates, and deifies sinners? One answer immediately comes to mind – tell the biblical story. Yet there are many ways to tell this story, and some of them most decidedly do not convert, liberate, and deify. We need a grammatical rule. Underlying the argument of my essay is a simple premise: *how we understand the conclusion of the gospel story necessarily informs and shapes how we tell that story from its beginning*.

If we believe that the final destiny of human beings is ultimately determined by the historical choices they make, we will focus our homiletical energies on persuading our hearers to believe in Jesus, act righteously, and avoid sin. In this case, Moses becomes our model of sound preaching:

See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long

in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. (Deut. 30:15–18, RSV)

All that the Christian preacher adds to the Mosaic exhortation is a note of eschatological finality.

But if our faith is determined by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and thus by the final future that he freely grants, a different kind of preaching opens to us. Hope anticipates the Savior's fulfillment of his promises and therefore authorizes the preacher to proclaim the gospel as good and liberating news. In the name of the risen Lord, by the power of his Spirit, the preacher declares the paschal promises. The sermon or homily becomes an eschatological gift and a salvific event.

St Isaac the Syrian and Apokatastasis

The seventh-century bishop and ascetic writer St. Isaac the Syrian is celebrated as, above all, a mystical theologian of divine love. He delights in speaking of the unconditional love of God. No doubt this is why his discourses have captured the hearts of so many believers over the centuries. As Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev writes, "In Isaac's understanding, God is above all immeasurable and boundless love. The conviction that God is love dominates Isaac's thought: it is the source of his theological opinions, ascetical recommendations, and mystical insights."¹ The love of the Creator fills the heart of this great ascetic with wonder and awe, inciting him to rhapsodic praise:

What profundity of richness, what mind and exalted wisdom is God's! What compassionate kindness and abundant goodness belongs to the Creator! ...In love did He bring the world into existence; in love does He guide it during this its temporal existence; in love is He going to bring it to that wondrous transformed state, and in love will the world be swallowed up in the great mystery of Him who has performed all these

¹ Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 35–36.

things; in love will the whole course of the governance of creation be finally comprised (2.38.1–2).²

The world begins in love, is ordered, maintained, and sustained in love, and concludes in love. The divine love is absolute, unconditional, unmerited, gratuitous, extravagant, prodigal. It has as its object every human and angelic being, the righteous and the wicked. St. Isaac is clear: no one is “to the front or to the back of God’s love,” since God has a “single equal love” for saint and sinner alike (2.38.2).

Any suggestion that God might, in response to sin, alter his attitude toward rational beings compromises divine immutability and destroys the Love that God is. God is not a creature: he does not live in time, he is not affected by the events of history, and he is not subject to the passions. “In the mind of the Creator,” Isaac explains, “there exists a single even intention with respect to all rational beings, and there exists with Him a single love and compassion which is spread out over all creation, (a love) which is without alteration, timeless and everlasting” (2.40.1). This divine love precedes God’s creation of the world and does not change in response to the actions of his creatures; it preveniently embraces both the righteous and the unrighteous. “God has a single caring concern for those who have fallen, just as much as for those who have not fallen” (2.40.3).

If the omnibenevolent Deity is so promiscuous and indiscriminate in his love, what then of his justice? Isaac famously replies, “Do not call God just, for His justice is not manifest in the things concerning you” (1.51.250).³ How can we call God just, when we see the owner of the vineyard giving the same wages to those who worked the entire day and to those who

² Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian), *The Second Part*, ed. and trans. Sebastian Brock (Peeters: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1995). Parenthetical citations of quotes from Isaac the Syrian beginning with Arabic numeral 2 are from the above source and translation; parenthetical citations beginning with Arabic numeral 1 are from the collection of homilies cited in footnote 3, below.

³ Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, trans. Holy Transfiguration Monastery, rev. 2nd ed. (Boston, Massachusetts: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011).

worked only one hour? How can we call God just when we see the father lavishing gifts upon his wayward son who had thrown away his inheritance on women and wine? “Where, then, is God’s justice?” asks Isaac, “for while we are sinners Christ died for us!” (1.51.251).

Similarly, one may ask how the Last Judgment and the “difficult matter of Gehenna” (2.39.1) are reconciled with this boundless love. Christians have long believed that Holy Scripture teaches that God will reward the righteous with eternal bliss and punish the wicked with eternal torment. St. Isaac, however, rejects the claim that God punishes the wicked for all eternity. In his opinion, this is a reduction of the God and Father of Jesus Christ to the condition of a pagan deity. Thus he declares that “God is not one who requites evil, but he sets evil aright” (2.39.15). Love is incompatible with retaliation; it is only concerned with “what is most advantageous in the future: it examines what is to come, and not things that are past” (2.39.17). Thus, we see how St. Isaac the Syrian reads scriptural passages about God’s justice and judgement through a hermeneutic of love. He acknowledges that the scriptures sometimes appear to attribute wrath and vengeance to the Almighty Creator. But all such references need to be interpreted figuratively, in accordance with the gospel of Christ.

In Gehenna the reprobate suffer because they have been made aware of how they have rejected their supreme good and sinned against their truest friend, the Lord. Unlike other fathers, such as St. John of Damascus, who denies that the damned have any remaining desire for God, St. Isaac sees them as still possessing a small measure of desire. Thus, their sufferings are caused in part by their regret and remorse, their guilt, their “grief for love.” The Father never ceases to love the damned nor to will their good and salvation – and that enduring love is their damnation:

I say that even those who are tormented in Gehenna are tormented with the torments of love. Torment for love’s sake, that is, the torment of those who perceive that they have sinned against love, is harder and more bitter than the tortures of fear. The sufferings that take

hold of the heart through the sinning against love are more acute than any other torture. It is absurd to think that the sinners in Gehenna are deprived of the love of the Creator. For love is a child of true knowledge and it is said that it will be given to all people. Love works with its force in a double way. It tortures those who have sinned, as we see also in the world between friends. And it gives delight to those who have kept its decrees. Thus it is also in Gehenna. I say that the hard tortures are grief for love. (1.27.201–202)⁴

The majority of St. Isaac's discourses (the first part) were translated into Greek and Latin in the late first millennium, and on the basis of these translations, he has been interpreted as affirming damnation as a noetic state of definitive and irrevocable rejection of God. In other words, Isaac the Syrian has been assimilated to the free-will model of everlasting perdition, and this understanding of St. Isaac the Syrian's theology of salvation and damnation remained the norm for over a thousand years.

A reappraisal of St. Isaac's theology became necessary, however, when in 1983, Sebastian Brock discovered a Syriac manuscript in the Bodleian Library of Oxford University containing over forty discourses of St. Isaac, previously thought to have been lost (the second part). Three of these homilies address the theme of eschatology; in them St Isaac passionately espouses the notion of *apokatastasis*, the final restoration of all created beings. He most certainly believes that at the Last Judgment God will condemn the impenitent and depraved to an existence of torment, *but* it will ultimately prove to be purgative and temporary. The damned may be "scourged by the scourge of love," but the scourging is not forever! In a hidden mystery of grace God will find a way to save all:

I am of the opinion that He is going to manifest some wonderful outcome, a matter of immense and ineffable

⁴ Translated in Patrik Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 202–203. This passage is found in the Transfiguration Monastery translation on p.266.

compassion on the part of the glorious Creator, with respect to the ordering of this difficult matter of (Gehenna's) torment: out of it the wealth of His love and power and wisdom will become known all the more – and so will the insistent might of the waves of his goodness. (2.39.6)

According to St. Isaac, God does not punish to no purpose: he chastises only to purify and liberate. The eternal Creator did not create hell, but foreknowing humanity's fall into sin, he has incorporated Gehenna into his redemptive purposes. "The Kingdom and Gehenna," St Isaac avers, "are matters belonging to mercy, which were conceived of in their essence by God as a result of His eternal goodness. ... That we should say or think that the matter is not full of love and mingled with compassion would be an opinion full of blasphemy and insult to our Lord God" (2.39.22). Borrowing a phrase from Sergius Bulgakov, we can describe St. Isaac the Syrian's conception of Gehenna as a "universal purgatory;" the punishment of Gehenna is reparative, remedial, and therapeutic.⁵ God's love and mercy will ultimately triumph in the hearts of even the most hardened sinners.

The Syrian ascetic does not speculate on *how* God might effect the conversion of the damned. Apparently he did not feel the need to offer an explanation. Rather, his teaching is governed by an adamant hope, based in scripture and mystical experience, which trumps all other considerations. As Patrik Hagman notes, "ultimately, Isaac bases his belief on *hope* on his firm trust in God as a loving father. Gehenna was created with our future good in mind."⁶ Despite hell, and even because of hell, the final destiny of humanity will be glorious;

⁵ For creative speculation on how God might accomplish the eschatological conversion of the wicked, see Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), chap. 8; Thomas Talbot, *The Inescapable Love of God*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 181–189; and George MacDonald, "The Last Farthing," in the series *Unspoken Sermons*, available online at <http://www.online-literature.com/george-macdonald/unspoken-sermons/18/>, accessed April 7, 2018.

⁶ Hagman, *Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh*, 202.

the grace and mercy of God will ultimately overcome all resistance, and God will be all in all.⁷ It would be blasphemous, suggests Isaac the Syrian, to think otherwise.⁸

The Proclamatory Rule of the Gospel

What difference does the idea of apokatastasis, of a universal restoration, make to the preaching of the gospel in the liturgy? The answer to this question is not clear, even to the most fervent advocates of this ‘greater hope’. On one hand, Origen believed that hope in a universal restoration should only be shared with the spiritually mature, and St. Gregory of Nazianzus appears to have been even more reticent. St. Gregory of Nyssa, on the other hand, incorporated the idea of apokatastasis into his public teaching. So what difference does apokatastasis make? I argue that it can make all the difference in the world, since how we understand the ultimate conclusion of the gospel story will necessarily inform and shape how we tell that story.

More than a decade ago, I retired from parochial ministry, and suddenly found that, instead of having to deliver Sunday sermons, I was “privileged” to listen to them. I have now heard dozens of homilies proclaimed by Roman Catholic, Maronite, and Eastern Orthodox bishops and priests. Almost without exception, they share one common feature – exhortation, specifically, *exhortation embedded within a conditionalist lin-*

⁷ See Sebastian Brock, “St Isaac the Syrian and His Understanding of Universal Salvation and of ‘the Mystery of Gehenna (Hell)’,” Scribd, accessed April 7, 2018, <https://www.scribd.com/document/235764859/St-Isaac-the-Syrian-and-his-understanding-of-universal-salvation>. See also Hagman, *Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh*, chap. 8, and Alfeyev, *Spiritual World*, chap. 8.

⁸ For over a millennia Orthodox and Catholic Christians have interpreted the Fifth Ecumenical Council as dogmatically excluding all expressions of the universalist hope. Strong arguments, however, may be raised against this interpretation. See, for example, my article “Apokatastasis: The Heresy that Never Was,” *Eclectic Orthodoxy* (blog), accessed April 7, 2018, <https://afkimel.wordpress.com/2015/05/18/apocatastasis-the-heresy-that-never-was-2/>. Ilaria Ramelli has recently demonstrated that within first millennium Christianity the universalist hope was stronger and more widespread than previously recognized: Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis* (Boston: Brill, 2013).

guistic structure. Orthodox and Catholic preachers alike appear to believe that their principal homiletical task is *to urge* their hearers to behave differently. By and large, they simply skip the gospel and focus entirely on admonition. Eastern preachers tend to emphasize ascetical practice, while Latin preachers show more concern for ethical behavior, but the message is the same – work harder! To borrow the language of the sixteenth-century Reformers, Orthodox and Catholic pastors preach the law.

The discourse of law shares a common transactional structure: if x , then y . It can be presented in positive terms of reward and merit (if you get straight A's on your report card, your mother and I will give you a new car; if you mow my lawn and trim the hedges, I will pay you \$50) or negative terms of penalty and punishment (if you do not turn in your term paper by the end of the semester, you will fail the course; if you arrive late to work one more time, I will terminate your employment). These and similar pledges make the outcome *contingent* upon the performance of the one to whom the promise is directed. They present to us a future which we ourselves must actualize: if we fulfill the specified conditions, or fail to fulfill them, we will bring about the promised result, whether it be reward or punishment.

We are all intimately acquainted with this kind of transactional communication. Law is the primary discourse of our political, commercial, and judicial systems. We determine our futures by the contracts we make. Law functions as demand upon our performance, and upon this performance falls the weight of the utterance. Once a conditional promise is spoken to us, we had best get busy, either to obtain or avoid the consequent. A conditional promise, in other words, presents the future to us as command, obligation, and threat. It structures how we experience the fallen world we inhabit. Hence it is not surprising that moralism and legalism thoughtlessly dominate the preaching of the Church.

Similar to conditional promises, unconditional promises also exhibit a characteristic linguistic pattern: because x , therefore y . Here I cite examples with explicit Christian content: because Jesus is risen, your future will be glorious, despite

your sins and infidelities; because Christ is returning in glory, your life enjoys ultimate meaning and all your good dreams will be fulfilled; because you have died to sin in baptism and been reborn in the Spirit of the kingdom, you are now free to live in faithfulness and love. Just as a conditional promise posits a specific kind of future, so too does an unconditional promise present a particular vision of the future; but these two kinds of utterance impact our lives in remarkably different ways. When God speaks a conditional promise to us, the burden of its fulfillment falls totally upon us. Existentially, it does not matter if we are also told that God will help us by his grace; what matters is doing, or not doing, what needs to be done – this alone contains the difference between heaven and hell. But when God speaks unconditional promise, *he* assumes responsibility for our future, independent of our performance; *he* is the promise's guarantor. In the unconditional promise God presents the future to us as an eschatological gift, apprehended and grasped by faith.

"If you repent of your sins, God will forgive you," the preacher declares. On the face of it, the pronouncement is clear-cut. Divine absolution is offered on the basis of the fulfillment of a prior condition. If we wish to obtain reconciliation with our Creator, then we had best put our noses to the grindstone and get on with the work of repentance. James B. Torrance calls this *legal repentance*.⁹ Of course, somebody will need to explain to us what repentance involves – but that is incidental. The critical point is that the responsibility and burden of fulfilling the stipulated condition lies on our shoulders. Thus, every moment contains the threat of failure: What if I am unable to achieve a whole-hearted repentance? Will God forgive me? If I die in mortal sin, can God forgive?

But now consider the difference when forgiveness is declared in the form of an unconditional promise: "Because Jesus has borne your sins upon the cross, God forgives you; therefore, repent and live in the Holy Spirit." Suddenly everything

⁹ Torrance discusses the difference between legal and evangelical repentance in several of his published essays, as well as in James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

changes. By this word God raises us from the condemnation of sin and grants us a future no longer bound to the past. He enters our lives as a liberating power. While in any response to a conditional promise our activity is directed to the fulfillment of the specific work demanded of us, in response to the unconditional promise our lives may now be lived in the *freedom* of the Spirit. Repentance is no longer a task that we must accomplish *in order to* obtain absolution: it is the fruit of a *freely bestowed* absolution. In other words, forgiveness is logically prior to our penitential response. Torrance calls this *evangelical repentance*. Life in Christ thus becomes a joy lived in thanksgiving and tears, discipleship, holy works, ascetical discipline, and the worship and praise of God. At every moment we are surrounded and upheld by the divine mercy. We were lost but have been found, blind but now we see, dead but now alive in the power of the kingdom.

Immediately, however, our minds raise a host of objections to this vision of salvation. I am acquainted, I think, with most of them, and believe that they boil down to a single concern: if God declares me unconditionally forgiven, does that mean that I am free to disobey the commandments of God with impunity? Or, to state the same concern in its universal scope, will all be saved? Does this not do violence to human free-will? Surely there is something we must *do*? In a descriptive sense there is, of course, something we must do. If I close my heart to my lover, I will never be able to enjoy the gift of her love; so too, if I refuse to repent of my sin, I will never be able to experience the freedom of the sons of God. This is all true descriptively, but when this description is translated into prescription, the gospel becomes a tyrannical voice that leads us into either self-righteousness or despair. The oft-rehearsed objections to the completely unconditional nature of the divine love ultimately drive us back to the evangelical faith of St. Isaac of Nineveh.

So what difference should apokatastasis make to the churchly preaching of the gospel? Above all, it should encourage and authorize pastors to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ precisely as *good news*. No more qualifications and compromises; no more ifs, buts, and maybes. The gospel is a

message of triumphant hope, or it is not gospel at all. Jesus is risen! He has transcended death and destroyed the power of Satan. In our fallen world, all of our promises ultimately turn into dust and ashes – we cannot pledge a future we do not possess. At any point death may intervene and nullify our commitments. But, unlike us, Jesus of Nazareth does possess the final and true future, by his paschal victory over death. Only the risen Christ can make an unconditional promise and mean it unconditionally. In the words of Robert W. Jenson: “If Jesus has death behind him, then his intention for his followers, defined by his particular life and death, must utterly triumph, there being no longer anything to stop him.”¹⁰

If Jesus were Attila the Hun or Joseph Stalin, the resurrection would be horrifying news indeed; but the resurrection of the Nazarene is the best, most wonderful, brilliant, and transforming news because of who he was and eternally is. Neither death nor life, neither principality nor power, can defeat the love by which Jesus the Messiah lived and died. His intentions for the Church, his intentions for all of humanity and the cosmos, and his intentions for each of us as individual persons, must and will triumph.

Jesus lived and then died. Therefore we have a definition of what it means to be Jesus, we know what he is: he is the one who lived wholly in the hope he had to bring his fellows, giving himself to that hope even to death. If despite death he now lives, then this self-giving is not only an item of the past to be remembered, but a surprise in the future to be expected. And if that, then not merely one item of the future, but the last future, the conclusion of the human enterprise. For death is already behind him, and nothing can any more limit his hopeful self-giving; it will necessarily encompass all men and all man’s history.¹¹

¹⁰ Robert W. Jenson, “On the Problem(s) of Scriptural Authority,” *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 238.

¹¹ Robert W. Jenson, *Story and Promise* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 43–44. This theme has been a constant in Jenson’s theology over the decades. “That Jesus lives means that his love, perfected at the cross, is now

The preaching of the gospel is simply this – the annunciation of the resurrection, with all of its consequences and implications for our lives.¹²

Eastern Christians know this. At the Matins of Pascha we declaim the words of St. John Chrysostom:

Enjoy ye all the feast of faith: Receive ye all the riches of loving-kindness. Let no one bewail his poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed. Let no one weep for his iniquities, for pardon has shown forth from the grave. Let no one fear death, for the Savior's death has set us free.¹³

The indicatives of the gospel precede the imperatives; the evangelical narrative envelops all ethical and ascetical exhortations. Pastors may dare to boldly promise the kingdom, for the crucified one lives and has given himself as surety.

But not only does Jesus guarantee the promise of eschatological fulfillment; he is, and must be, its ultimate preacher as well. Every address involves someone's personal presence. In this paper, for example, I am intruding into your life with my idiosyncratic, and perhaps controversial, reflections on preaching. But were I to stand before you and unconditionally promise you eternal salvation in the kingdom of the incarnate Son, then it could not be me alone addressing you. I cannot rightly make such a pledge, for I cannot realize and consummate its promised future. Only the one who has death behind him can do so; only the conqueror of death may bestow the eschaton.

active to surprise us. That Jesus lives means that there is a subject who has us as his objects, and who wills our good in a freedom beyond our prediction. Indeed, *fully* reliable love can *only* be the resurrected life of one who has died for the beloved ones. If I commit myself in love, I may die of it. If I do not, my love remains uncertain; if I do, it is lost – unless I rise again. When the gospel proclaims actual unconditional love, it proclaims a specific, individual love, the love that is the actuality of the risen Jesus. No one else can love unconditionally as does the Lord; not even the church can so love her members or they one another." Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1:199.

¹² See Joshua Genig, *Viva Vox* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

¹³ St. John Chrysostom, "The Paschal Sermon," *Orthodox Church in America*, accessed April 7, 2018, <https://oca.org/fs/sermons/the-paschal-sermon>.

When the preacher dares to proclaim the gospel in its radical power, *there* the voice of Jesus Christ is heard. The making of the eschatological promise must be *his* act, *his* presence, *his* Word, *his* kingdom. “If the gospel promise is true and unconditional,” Jenson writes, “then the event of the living word, of one person speaking the gospel to another, is the locus of God’s reality for us. Where is God? He is where one man is promising good unconditionally to another, in Jesus’ name.”¹⁴ Or as our Lord himself has taught us: “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matt 18:20, RSV)

I propose the following grammatical or hermeneutical rule for our preaching: *so proclaim the story of Jesus Christ that it elicits from our hearers nothing less than faith or offense*. Or, to put this rule in its most succinct form: *proclaim the gospel in the mode of unconditional promise*. Robert Jenson calls this a meta-linguistic rule;¹⁵ George Lindbeck, a meta-theological rule.¹⁶ Either way, this rule does not specify the content of our preaching – that content is given in the scriptures and the sacred tradition of the Church. The rule, rather, *prescribes* and *instructs* how to rightly proclaim this content: preach the gospel of the crucified and risen Son of God, not as law and obligation, but as a word that liberates sinners from the bondage of sin, conquers despair, and empowers believers to live lives of holiness, prayer, and radical discipleship. The proclamatory rule invites preachers to speak into the world the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some may protest that they have never heard such a hermeneutical rule before. Lindbeck replies to this objection by pointing out that “rules can be followed in practice without any

¹⁴ Robert W. Jenson and Eric W. Gritsch, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 102. See also Robert W. Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 6: “The gospel promise is unconditional, for behind it stands the victor over death. Just so, it is the word of God, who has all the future.”

¹⁵ Jenson and Gritsch, *Lutheranism*, 42–44.

¹⁶ George Lindbeck, “Article IV and Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue,” in *The Church in a Postliberal Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 42–43.

explicit or theoretical knowledge of them.”¹⁷ For example, Homer was a supreme master of Ionic Greek long before the grammatical rules of the language were codified, showing how one can speak a language well without being able to articulate the rules governing that language. Hence it is at least possible – and, I would argue, highly probable – that from Pentecost on Christians have lived, celebrated, preached, and sacramentally enacted the unconditionality of grace, despite the absence of an explicit regulative canon. It is also certain that at various times and places pastors and preachers have compromised the gospel by reducing the free gift of salvation to a work that must be earned or transactionally acquired.

Preaching the Kingdom

In conclusion, it is worthwhile to consider the proclamatory rule of the gospel in light of the eschatological nature of the Holy Eucharist. In recent decades, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann and Metropolitan John Zizioulas have made powerful arguments for a recovery of the eschatological dimension of the Eucharist. Schmemmann speaks of the Divine Liturgy as the “sacrament of the Kingdom,” while Zizioulas uses language of “the icon of the Kingdom.” Zizioulas quotes the words of St. Maximus the Confessor: “For the things of the Old Testament are the shadow; those of the New Testament are the image. The truth is the state of things to come.”¹⁸ The Church lives from this future; the kingdom that is to come causes the Eucharist and confers upon it its true being.

The Divine Liturgy does not merely commemorate the events of past history: it blesses, invokes, and anticipates the future; it even *remembers* the future. “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” the celebrant intones at the beginning of the liturgy. At the Great Entrance he declares to the assembly: “May the Lord God remember all of you in His kingdom, now and forever and to the ages of ages.” And the anaphora of St John Chrysostom stri-

¹⁷ Lindbeck, “Article IV,” 43.

¹⁸ John Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 44.

kingly recalls not only the cross and resurrection of Christ but also his “second and glorious Coming.”

In the Mystical Supper the risen and ascended Son comes to the Church from his eternal futurity; or, to make the same point in different imagery, the Church is lifted up by the Spirit into the heavens and gathered into the messianic banquet. The kingdom is Jesus Christ, risen, glorified, and returning. Zizioulas elaborates:

What we experience in the divine Eucharist is the end time making itself present to us now. The Eucharist is not a repetition or continuation of the past, or just one event amongst others, but it is the penetration of the future into time. The Eucharist is entirely live, and utterly new; there is no element of the past about it. The Eucharist is the incarnation live, the crucifixion live, the resurrection live, the ascension live, the Lord’s coming again and the day of judgment, live.¹⁹

Metropolitan John makes the same point elsewhere more succinctly: “In the Eucharist, we move within the space of the age to come, of the Kingdom.”²⁰

In the same way as the liturgy makes the kingdom present now, the proclamation of the gospel in the mode of unconditional promise means speaking the language of the *parousia*. The words of the preacher become words of prophecy bearing the living reality of the eschaton. The gospel is nothing less than the final judgment proleptically let loose into history. It thus confronts us with decisive authority, an authority not of law and condemnation but of blessing, forgiveness, transformation, and hope – the authority of *apokatastasis*.

When the preacher obeys the hermeneutical rule, he moves from talking *about* salvation to *giving* salvation. This move from second-order discourse to present-tense proclamation is

¹⁹ John D. Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Douglas H. Knight (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 155. Also see Alexandre Turincev, “An Approach to Orthodox Eschatology,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 58 (2013): 57–77.

²⁰ Zizioulas, *Eucharistic Communion*, 57.

crucial. As long as the preacher remains within the mode of description and explanation, the kerygmatic Word remains unspoken. Every homily is of course informed by the preacher's exegesis of the appointed biblical text, but eventually he needs to move from saying words about God to actually speaking good news in the name of God.²¹

As an analogy, consider the difference between the language of lovers and the language of psychologists. Psychologists can tell us all about what lovers experience, what they feel and do, and how love changes and energizes them, all in a quite informative way. But when you are in love, this kind of information is not what you want to hear from your beloved. What you want to hear, what you need to hear, is "I love you." This simple declaration makes all the difference. In the same way, preaching the gospel occurs when the message is transformed into salvific deed and act. The Word of God effects what it announces and does what it proclaims. By the unconditional promise of Christ Jesus, the preacher converts, justifies, regenerates, illumines, and deifies his hearers.²² He communicates salvation. He does not simply speak about salvation – he *does* it; he *performs* it. By the gospel of resurrection, the preacher re-creates the world. Sinners are absolved, saints are made, new life is bestowed. The homily thus becomes an eschatological event that slays the old man and gives birth to the new. "The proclamation of the Word," Schmemmann writes,

is a sacramental act *par excellence* because it is a transforming act. It transforms the human words of the Gospel into the Word of God and the manifestation of the Kingdom. And it transforms the man who hears the

²¹ See Gerhard Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

²² "The [meta-linguistic] instruction is not to induce, or manipulate, conversion by our discourse; the hearers' conversion is to be accomplished as the act of gospel-speaking itself. Conversion is a change in the communication situation within which every person lives; a proper sermon or baptism liturgy or penance liturgy just *is* that change." Robert W. Jenson, "Holy Spirit," in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2:134.

Word into a receptacle of the Word and a temple of the Spirit.²³

When, contrary to this mode of proclaiming the gospel, a preacher presents the good news of Christ in the form of conditional promises and transactions, he violates the eschatological reality of the Eucharist. It does not matter if he does so for moralistic or ascetical reasons. The result is the same – the good news is reduced to law, and law cannot open faith or bestow new life. The gospel tolerates no conditions, for in the kingdom there is no longer time for the fulfillment of conditions. The eschaton is coming and is come. In response there can only be faith or offense. We either find ourselves celebrating the gift of eternal life or cursing the uncreated radiance.

Jesus is risen! He comes to us in his Word in utter grace, infinite charity, unmerited forgiveness, startling generosity, omnipotent benevolence, transforming holiness, deifying triumph – this is the good news we are commissioned to declare; it is this good news the world yearns to hear, needs to hear. The world is fluent in law. Anyone can speak it; everyone already does. Only the Church of the risen Son may unconditionally promise the consummation of all in the One who will be all in all.

²³ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 33.