In this essay for Christian Theology for Today, King attempts to find the "spiritual meaning" of four Christian concepts: the second coming of Christ, the day of judgment, immortality, and the Kingdom of God. He asserts that in a "Copernican universe" a literal interpretation of these concepts is "quite absurd." Following Davis’s instructions, King drew from George Hedley's Symbol of the Faith, which examines the Apostles' Creed. In the final paragraph, King links the coming of the Kingdom of God to the rise of "a society governed by the law of love." Davis gave the paper an A — without further comment.

In the early years of the Christian era primitive Christians set forth certain religious beliefs which have come to be looked upon by the modern mind as quite erroneous. To be sure, some modern minds of the orthodox temperament are willing to hold on to these traditional beliefs quite tenaciously. But the more objective modern minds are confronted with insuperable difficulties when such issues arise. They argue that such beliefs are unscientific, impossible, and even bizarre. Among the beliefs which many modern Christians find difficult to accept are those dealing with eschatological hopes, particularly the second coming of Christ, the day of judgment, and the resurrection of the body. In an attempt to solve this difficult problem many modern Christians have jettisoned these beliefs altogether, failing to see that there is a profundity of spiritual meaning in these beliefs which goes beyond the shackles of literalism. We must realize that these beliefs were formulated by an unscientific people who knew nothing about a Copernican universe or any of the laws of modern science. They were attempting to solve basic problems which were quite real to them, problems which to them dealt with ultimate destiny. So it was only natural for them to speak in the pre-scientific thought pattern of their day. They could do no other. Inspiration did not magically remove the limitations of the writers. It heightened their power, but did not remove their distortions. Therefore it is our job as Christians to seek the spiritual pertinence of these beliefs, which taken literally are quite absurd. We would probably all agree
with the spiritual meaning of what these early Christians were trying to say, although we would disagree with how they said it. At this point we may turn to a discussion of the more significant eschatological hopes and attempt to find the Christian pertinence embedded therein.

The Second Coming of Christ

It is obvious that most twentieth century Christians must frankly and flatly reject any view of a physical return of Christ. To hold such a view would mean denying a Copernican universe, for there can be no physical return unless there is a physical place from which to return. In its literal form this belief belongs to a pre-scientific world view which we cannot accept. Where then do we find the Christian pertinence of this belief? We may find it in the words of one of the greatest Christians the world has ever known—St. Paul. “Nevertheless I live: yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.”

* Galatians 2:20.

Also we may turn to the words of the Fourth Gospel, “I will not leave you comfortless; I come to you. Because I live, ye shall live also.” The most precious thought in Christianity is that Jesus is our daily friend, that he never did leave us comfortless or alone, and that we may know his transforming communion every day of our lives. As Dr. Hedley succinctly states, “The second coming of the Christ is not an event in space-time, but an experience which transcends all physical categories. It belongs not to the sky, but to the human heart; not to the future, but to whatever present we are willing to assign to it.”

† George Hedley, The Symbol of the Faith, p. 97.

Actually we are celebrating the Second Advent every time we open our hearts to Jesus, every time we turn our backs to the low road and accept the high road, every time we say no to self that we may say yes to Jesus Christ, every time a man or women turns from ugliness to beauty and is able to forgive even their enemies. Jesus stands at the door of our hearts if we are willing to admit him. He is far away if with

---

1. George Hedley, Symbol of the Faith (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 2: “It is obvious that we must reject, frankly and flatly, any thought of a physical return of Jesus of Nazareth. To try to hold to it is to repudiate a Copernican universe, for there can be no physical return from heaven unless there is a physical heaven from which to come. In its literal form the whole doctrine belongs to that pre-scientific world view which we cannot for a moment accept.”

2. This biblical passage is cited in Hedley, Symbol, p. 97.
ugliness and evil we crowd him out. The final doctrine of the second coming is that whenever we turn our lives to the highest and best there for us is the Christ. This is what the early Christians were trying to say. To be sure they got in unscientific realm because they began by saying that Jesus was the promised Messiah. But the question arises, what led them to say that in the first place? It was the magnetic personality of this historic Jesus that caused men to explain his life in a category beyond the human. Here we are one with the unscientific early Christians, for all of our thoughts and teachings about the second coming, whether it be physical or spiritual, stem from the personality of that Jesus whom the Christians chose to call the Christ.

The Day of Judgment

Orthodox Christianity has held that when a man dies he sleeps until the general resurrection on the last day at which time Christ, the judge, will appear to summon all to a bar of justice. He will separate them “as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats,” sending the former to eternal bliss and the latter to endless hell. Needless to say the average modern Christian finds it quite difficult to accept such a view of judgment.

However, we must agree with the spiritual value of this view held by the early Christians, for the personality of Jesus does serve as a judgment upon us all. When we set aside the spectacular paraphernalia of the judgment scene and the literal throne we come to the real meaning of the doctrine. The highest court of justice is in the heart of man after the light of Christ has illumined his motive and all his inner life. Any day when we waken to the fact that we are making a great moral decision, any day of experienced nearness to Christ, any day when in the light of Christ, we see ourselves, is a day of judgment. In speaking of Jesus as judge of all human life Hedley remarks, “We have found no better pattern, nor do

3. Hedley, Symbol, p. 99: “He is in us, if we are willing to admit him. He is far away, and never shall return, if in us ugliness, and lies, and evil, crowd him out. The final doctrine of the second coming is that we determine its reality, each of us for himself.”
4. Hedley, Symbol, p. 105: “The personality of Jesus ... is in itself a judgement upon us all.”
5. Hedley, Symbol, p. 106: “Set aside the spectacular paraphernalia of the judgement scene.”
we think to seek another. When we are dishonest, we remember in embarrassment the absolute honesty of his mind. When we are disloyal, we are challenged by the find loyalty of his behavior. When we allow ourselves to become cheap, we are reminded of how much his way of living cost him."*6 In this sense Christ has already come to judge the world. Already and here he is judging every one of us. This is the ultimate meaning of the Christian doctrine. Dare we judge ourselves by the Christ?'

Immortality

Immortality to our fore fathers in the Christian tradition meant eternal rest and peace in a physical place called Heaven and everlasting communion with God. Those who failed to achieve this immortal life were subjected to a physical place called Hell in which they would suffer eternal misery by burning in a blazing fire. In modern times we have come to see that such eschatological thinking is by far incompatible with the modern scientific world view. A physical Heaven and a physical Hell are inconceivable in a Copernican universe. This changing world view has caused many modern minds to lose faith altogether in the immortal hope. But the question immediately arises, does a changing worly-view necessarily make the immortal hope impossible? What is the Christian pertinence of this doctrine?

Belief in immortality means primarily belief in God. It would be very difficult to conceive of God as blotting out the choicest fruit of the evolutionary process. The Christian sees reality in immortality because he sees reality in God. God is a God that will conserve all values of the universe.

Again the worthfulness of the personal life of Jesus makes immortality meaningful. Through his spirit Jesus brought the immortal hope to light. He had a quality of spirit that death couldn't hold (cf. Acts 2:24). His love was too powerful for death. His truth was too eternal for death. His goodness was too influential for death. Dr. Brown has put this idea in words that are quite apt at this point. He says: "Many arguments may be given for believing in a life after death

6. King omitted one sentence from the original (Hedley, Symbol, p. 107).
7. Hedley, Symbol, p. 109: "Dare we judge ourselves by the Christ?"
but the greatest of them all is the creative experience; the new life which Jesus makes possible for us here and now—a life which reveals to us capacities in ourselves which require another life for their fulfilment.”

It is here that we find the Christian pertinence of this immortal hope. This is what the early Christian Fathers were attempting to say. Because of the world view of their day they could with ease posit a physical immortality. But with all of their unscientific thinking they were saying essentially what we may say—God is a conserver of values. For us immortality will mean a spiritual existence. All of the details of what this existence will be like are somewhat beyond our intelligence. But with faith in God we may rest assure that death will not be a period that will end this great sentence of life, but it will be a comma punctuating it to more loftier significance.

The Kingdom of God

The eschatological thinking of the Christian religion is not without its social emphasis. Throughout nineteen hundred years Christian thinking has centered on the kingdom of God. Some have seen this kingdom in political terms in which there would be established a theocratic kingdom on earth which would triumph over all rival and satanically inspired regimes. Others have seen the kingdom of God coming to realization by means of the increasing influence of the church ultimately destined to dominate the world. Others have seen it as the day when Jesus shall return on the clouds bringing about a cataclysmic end of history and establishing God’s eternal purpose. Certainly we in the modern world find it very difficult to accept many of the older interpretations of the kingdom of God. But however varied our interpretations may be, there is at bottom a profound spiritual {meaning} in the concept. “The phrase meant literally the reign of God, the condition of things in which God’s will is everywhere supreme.”* Here we are left in no doubt as to the true meaning of the concept. Whether it come soon or late, by sudden crisis of through slow development, the kingdom of God will be a society in which all men and women will be con-

* W. A. Brown, Beliefs that Matter, p. 280.

8. This quotation is from William Adams Brown, Beliefs That Matter: A Theology for Laymen (New York: Scribner, 1928), p. 56.
trolled by the eternal love of God. When we see social relationships controlled everywhere by the principles which Jesus illustrated in his life—trust, love, mercy, and altruism—then we shall know that the kingdom of God is here. To say what this society will be like in exact detail is quite hard for us to picture, for it runs so counter to the practices of our present social life. But we can rest assured that it will be a society governed by the law of love.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


“How Modern Christians Should Think of Man”

[29 November 1949—15 February 1950]
[Chester, Pa.]

In this paper, written late during the second term of Davis’s Christian Theology for Today, King begins to depart from theological liberalism, balancing neo-orthodoxy and liberalism to express his understanding of humanity and religion. For example, he acknowledges elements of determinism in human experience in one section of the paper but stresses the roles of sin and choice in an individual’s life in another. He cites personal experiences of racism to show the “vicious” potential of human beings, but, following liberal theologians, King also praises the “noble possibilities in human nature” when people choose to fight this evil. The reference to racism marks this paper as more personal than others King wrote for this course.