

Apocalypse as Perpetual Advent: The Apocalyptic Sermons of Rudolf Bultmann

David W. Congdon

University Press of Kansas, USA

Theology Today

2018, Vol. 75(1) 51–63

© The Author(s) 2018

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0040573618763574

journals.sagepub.com/home/ttj



Abstract

The apocalyptic interpretation of the New Testament was developed in the mid-twentieth century in explicit opposition to the work of Rudolf Bultmann, and this conflict has persisted despite the changes that have taken place within the field of apocalyptic theology. This article interrogates the relation between Bultmann and apocalyptic in two ways. First, it takes a second look at the history of twentieth-century theology and shows that the work of Ernst Käsemann, who was instrumental in retrieving apocalyptic as normative for Christian thought, contained two distinct definitions of apocalyptic, only one of which Bultmann rejected. The other definition became the dominant position in later apocalyptic scholarship. Second, the article gives a fresh hearing to Bultmann's theology by exploring his often overlooked Advent and Christmas sermons. Whereas current work in apocalyptic theology focuses on Paul's theology of the cross, Bultmann develops a distinctively existential apocalyptic on the basis of John's theology of advent.

Keywords

advent, apocalyptic theology, Bultmann, dialectical theology, eschatology, Käsemann, Martyn, parousia, Rutledge

The standard account of the “rediscovery of apocalyptic”¹ goes something like this: In 1892 Johannes Weiss launched an assault on liberal theology and a revolution in biblical studies when he argued that Jesus' preaching about the kingdom of God presupposed Jewish apocalyptic and anticipated the imminent end of history and

1. Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic: A Polemical Work on a Neglected Area of Biblical Studies and Its Damaging Effects on Theology and Philosophy*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1972).

Corresponding author:

David W. Congdon, University Press of Kansas, 2502 Westbrooke Circle, Lawrence, KS 66045-4444, USA.
Email: dwcogdon@gmail.com

the transformation of the world. Albert Schweitzer radicalized this interpretation in his 1906 work on the history of life-of-Jesus research. But both Weiss and Schweitzer were committed to the theology of liberal Protestantism, so while they recognized the role of apocalyptic in the preaching of Jesus, they dismissed the idea of giving apocalyptic any normative significance for Christian faith today. Liberal theology's ethical and spiritual interpretation of Jesus remained in place, though it could no longer claim direct support from the New Testament. Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann offered an alternative in the 1920s by affirming over against liberalism the normativity of biblical eschatology, while at the same time rejecting, or demythologizing, apocalyptic as either a theologically dubious hypothesis (Barth) or a historically obsolete belief of antiquity (Bultmann).² Finally, Ernst Käsemann arrived in 1960 to recover apocalyptic as a valid interpretive framework for Christianity, followed shortly by Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann, who explored the wider significance of apocalyptic for Christian theology.

While the standard account is accurate in its broad contours, it has faced opposition in recent years regarding Barth's place in this narrative.³ The conflict between Bultmann and the apocalyptic school, however, remains as unyielding as ever. This article aims to unsettle this rigid opposition by both rethinking the development of apocalyptic theology—especially in Käsemann—and offering a fresh hearing of Bultmann's own theology as it finds expression in his preaching, an often overlooked source for understanding his thought.⁴

In her justly praised work on *The Crucifixion*, Fleming Rutledge exemplifies apocalyptic theology in her declaration that “the cross itself is the definitive

2. For Barth's dismissal of Käsemann's work on apocalyptic, see Karl Barth, *Gespräche 1963*, ed. Eberhard Busch, Gesamtausgabe 4 (Zürich: TVZ, 2005), 253–57, esp. 255–56. Bultmann's view of apocalyptic as part of the pre-Christian, mythological context that early Christian theology rejects is found in many of his writings, most famously perhaps in his 1941 lecture on demythologizing in which he states, “All of this is mythological talk, and the individual motifs may be easily traced to the contemporary mythology of Jewish apocalyptic and the Gnostic myth of redemption.” Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation [1941],” in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 2; translation revised. See Rudolf Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie: Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung*, ed. Eberhard Jüngel (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1985), 13.

3. See especially Walter Lowe, “Why We Need Apocalyptic,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63, no. 1 (2010): 41–53; Shannon Nicole Smythe, *Forensic Apocalyptic Theology: Karl Barth and the Doctrine of Justification* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

4. This is not my first effort at rethinking the relationship between Bultmann and apocalyptic theology. I did so previously in the following: David W. Congdon, “Eschatologizing Apocalyptic: An Assessment of the Present Conversation on Pauline Apocalyptic,” in *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology: With and Beyond J. Louis Martyn*, ed. Joshua B. Davis and Douglas K. Harink (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 118–36; David W. Congdon, “Bonhoeffer and Bultmann: Toward an Apocalyptic Rapprochement,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15, no. 2 (2013): 172–95. I further develop the apocalyptic reading of Bultmann in David W. Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 357–59.

apokalypsis of God.”⁵ The apocalyptic school of theology is decidedly, and appropriately, crucicentric in its interpretation of Paul and Christian theology more generally; it sees the crucifixion of Jesus as the site of God’s cosmic victory over the powers of Sin and Death. The current impasse between Bultmann and apocalyptic, however, is largely the result of a narrow focus on the cross. I argue that Bultmann is himself an apocalyptic theologian, but, counterintuitively, that he displays his apocalypticism less in his Pauline theology of the cross and more in his Johannine theology of incarnation, which comes to expression most clearly in the sermons he gave during the Advent season at the University of Marburg.

A Second Look at Apocalyptic

To arrive at a more accurate view of the relation between Bultmann and apocalyptic, we need to understand the equivocal way in which the term apocalyptic has been used over the decades. As we will see, a subtle but decisive shift occurred in Käsemann’s work.

We should observe at the outset that Weiss uses the terms “apocalyptic” and “eschatological” interchangeably to refer to “the expectation of the *immediate* onset of the end” and “a quite imminent establishment of the Kingdom.”⁶ Apocalyptic eschatology understands the end as imminent because of its mythological cosmology, in which there is “a twofold world, and thus also a twofold occurrence of events,” such that “all history is only the consequence, effect, or parallel copy of heavenly events.”⁷ When Barth and Bultmann refer to apocalyptic, they have this mythological eschatology in mind. Barth, for instance, rejects “enthusiastic-apocalyptic illusions of an anticipated unity of this world and the beyond [*Diesseits und Jenseits*]” in the 1922 second edition of his Romans commentary, which echoes Weiss’s talk of the earthly and spiritual realms.⁸ Bultmann in his 1926 book on Jesus describes apocalyptic as a form of Jewish eschatology influenced by “the mythology of Oriental eschatologies,” which “sought to unravel the secrets of the divine plan for the world, to recognize the signs of the end, to calculate the time of its arrival, and to invent fantastic elaborations of the heavenly glory.”⁹ His 1941 programmatic essay on demythologizing argues that “mythical

5. Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 353.

6. Johannes Weiss, *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, ed. Richard Hyde Hiers and David Larrimore Holland (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 86, 85.

7. *Ibid.*, 74.

8. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, ed. Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe 2 (Zürich: TVZ, 2010), 225.

9. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero (New York: Scribner, 1934), 18–19.

eschatology is finished basically by the simple fact that Christ's parousia did not take place immediately as the New Testament expected it to."¹⁰

Both Barth and Bultmann understand apocalyptic as a particular cosmology in which the kingdom of God is expected to be an imminent and objective reality for all people. The otherness of this kingdom is only quantitative, not qualitative; once it arrives it is part of this world. Barth and Bultmann thus reject the *quantitative* difference of apocalyptic in favor of the *qualitative* difference of eschatology, which they understand as referring not to the chronological imminence of God's future kingdom but to the transcendent otherness of God's inbreaking action in Christ.¹¹ Eschatology—for Bultmann especially—is a realized eschatology because the decisive eschatological event has already occurred in Christ and encounters one here and now in the proclamation of the gospel.¹² Bultmann understands apocalyptic, by contrast, to be a worldview that makes concrete claims about future world history. Apocalyptic “draws up pictures of the end-time, and it fixes the end chronologically.”¹³ The future within apocalyptic refers to history as generally experienced by people regardless of faith. While Barth and Bultmann come to disagree about the centrality of eschatology—Barth shifts from eschatology to christology in the mid-1920s—they nevertheless both agree that apocalyptic is not an original or essential aspect of Christian theology.¹⁴

Against Bultmann, Ernst Käsemann argued in 1960 that “apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology,” but his position harbors an inner ambiguity.¹⁵ The essay in which he proposed his controversial thesis was not a programmatic statement about contemporary theology but rather a “reconstruction” of the history behind the text, specifically the Synoptic texts.¹⁶ Speaking as a historian

10. Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” 5.

11. Barth provided the definitive statement in *Der Römerbrief*: “Christianity that is not completely and utterly eschatology has completely and utterly nothing to do with *Christ*.” See Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung)*, 430.

12. In eschatology, Bultmann argues, “the end-time takes place rather in the proclamation as an occurrence that happens at any particular time.” See Rudolf Bultmann, “Ist die Apokalyptik die Mutter der christlichen Theologie? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Ernst Käsemann [1964],” in *Exegetica: Aufsätze zur Erforschung des Neuen Testaments*, ed. Erich Dinkler (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967), 477.

13. *Ibid.*, 476.

14. For more on Barth's shift from eschatology to protology, see Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing*, 123–29.

15. Ernst Käsemann, “Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie [1960],” in *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960–64), 2:100. Hereafter cited as *EVB*.

16. *Ibid.*, 83. Käsemann saw himself as a historian tasked with keeping the church honest. In his 1962 defense of his “purely historical analysis” against the criticisms of Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs, Käsemann declared that “some have to dedicate themselves to administering the estate of the historians in order to unsettle the interpreters.” Ernst Käsemann, “Zum Thema der urchristlichen Apokalyptik [1962],” in *EVB*, 2:105. See Gerhard Ebeling, “Der Grund christlicher Theologie: Zum Aufsatz Ernst Käsemanns über ‘Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie,’”

of Christian origins, Käsemann defines apocalyptic as follows: “Almost without exception, I speak of early Christian apocalyptic to indicate the expectation of an imminent parousia . . . The beginnings of church and theology were conditioned by imminent expectation.”¹⁷ The Easter faith of the disciples—but not the faith of Jesus himself, Käsemann argues—awaits “the return of Jesus as the heavenly Son of Man.”¹⁸ Käsemann thus identifies apocalyptic here with *future eschatology*. This becomes important when he treats the theology of Paul, which he sees as “a balance between present and future eschatology.”¹⁹ Bultmann’s decision to make “the present eschatology of the apostle the controlling center” is, according to Käsemann, a legitimate interpretation, though the latter argues we can make better sense of Paul’s overall thought if we make the apocalyptic (or future-eschatological) elements the interpretive key to his theology.²⁰

The ambiguity arises from the fact that alongside (and even before) this historical disagreement over the apocalyptic origins of Christian theology, Käsemann is also in a debate with Bultmann over the theological interpretation of Paul’s letters. The key to this theological dispute is the question of anthropology. Käsemann states in 1957 that “the hallmark of [Bultmann’s] interpretation of Paul is the way in which he makes anthropology the central point.”²¹ He then opposes Bultmann in 1962 with the claim that “Christian theology, in its origins, is thus very far from being anthropology.”²² And he goes further when in 1964 he observes that “almost nowhere in the New Testament outside of Paul and, in a highly restricted way, the Gospel of John is there an explicit anthropology.”²³ Käsemann charged Bultmann with a narrow interpretation of the New Testament that filtered everything through a problematic reading of Paul’s anthropology, reducing the gospel to an individualistic message of justification to the exclusion of all talk of God’s power and agency.²⁴

All of this serves to illuminate a second, more theological definition of apocalyptic, in which “the center of early Christian apocalyptic . . . is the enthronement of God and of God’s Christ as the eschatological Son of Man, which can also be

Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche 58 (1961): 227–44; Ernst Fuchs, “Über die Aufgabe einer christlichen Theologie,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 58 (1961): 245–67.

17. *Ibid.*, 106n1.

18. *Ibid.*, 110.

19. Käsemann, “Zum Thema der urchristlichen Apokalyptik,” 126.

20. *Ibid.*, 125.

21. Ernst Käsemann, “Neutestamentliche Fragen von heute,” in *EVB*, 2:22.

22. Käsemann, “Zum Thema der urchristlichen Apokalyptik,” 113.

23. Ernst Käsemann, “Sackgassen im Streit um den historischen Jesus,” in *EVB*, 2:44.

24. I have argued at length in my previous work that this reading of Bultmann fails to do justice to Bultmann’s writings and seriously misunderstands what Bultmann means by anthropology. See, for instance, Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing*, 190–91, 760–61; David W. Congdon, *Rudolf Bultmann: A Companion to His Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 25–26.

described as proof of the righteousness of God.”²⁵ This definition does not depend on the “impending irruption of the parousia” that he describes earlier in the same essay.²⁶ And that is important because, as he points out in the conclusion, belief in the imminent arrival of the exalted Christ “proved to be a delusion” and resulted in the collapse of the “whole theological framework of apocalyptic, with its expectation of the *parousia*.”²⁷ Yet the collapse of an apocalyptic based on imminent expectation is not the collapse of apocalyptic as such—at least not for Käsemann—because the concepts of enthronement and lordship live on in new forms. Elsewhere he says that Paul’s doctrine of justification declares that “God becomes Cosmocrator,” and thus this doctrine “has its roots in apocalyptic.”²⁸ Justification is apocalyptic since it teaches “that God is only ‘for us’ when God shatters our illusions and characterizes the new obedience of those who set aside their own authority in order to await [*erwarten*] their salvation from God alone. . . . The dying Christ becomes the creator of a new humanity by liberating us both from the attempt to follow the way of the law and from the despair of the rebel.”²⁹ Within this interpretation of Paul, imminent expectation (*Erwartung*) is no longer about the future parousia of Christ but the imminent arrival of God’s liberating word of freedom, which happens anew in every moment. This view increasingly comes to dominate Käsemann’s later work, so that by 1980, four years after Bultmann’s death, Käsemann can say that “God’s royal dominion is not merely imminent in the near future. It has instead already begun with the word and work of Jesus”—in clear contrast to his 1960 essay declaring that apocalyptic began only *after* Jesus and concerned something in the imminent future.³⁰

Käsemann thus represents an internal tension within apocalyptic. Defined in a strictly historical manner, the concept refers to a very specific belief in the literal, imminent coming of the Messiah. But defined more theologically (i.e., normatively)—over against a kind of anthropology that emphasizes human over divine action—the concept refers to the cosmic lordship and saving action of God in Christ, which destroys our illusions and idols and sets us free for faithful existence in the world.³¹ Both versions involve a decisive transition from the old age to the new. But the latter, theological version conceives this transition in a decidedly more existential manner; the divine *basileia*, in that case, is not an empirically observable reality. This makes all the difference, since it opens the door to a present-tense

25. Käsemann, “Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie,” 102.

26. *Ibid.*, 91.

27. *Ibid.*, 104.

28. Ernst Käsemann, *Paulinische Perspektiven* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1969), 133.

29. *Ibid.*, 77–78.

30. Ernst Käsemann, *Kirchliche Konflikte*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 215.

31. This theological understanding of apocalyptic becomes more prominent in Käsemann’s later work. See, for instance, the essays in Ernst Käsemann, *In der Nachfolge des gekreuzigten Nazareners: Aufsätze und Vorträge aus dem Nachlass*, ed. Rudolf Landau and Wolfgang Kraus (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

apocalyptic.³² In addition to the terminological confusion, it was confusing because Käsemann was engaged in a polemic with Bultmann in both lines of argument—he rejected Bultmann’s position on the origin and essence of early Christian theology and he rejected what he thought was Bultmann’s overly anthropological and existential (i.e., Johannine) understanding of Pauline theology. Subsequently, the apocalyptic interpretation of Paul, led initially by J. Christiaan Beker and J. Louis Martyn, took for granted Käsemann’s critique of Bultmann’s anthropology, and it conflated this with Käsemann’s critique of Bultmann on the apocalyptic origins of Christian theology. The historical and theological became inseparable: to accept an apocalyptic reading of Paul was therefore to reject Bultmann.

Consider, for example, Rutledge’s recent work on the crucifixion already mentioned. She reflects at length on the distinction between eschatology and apocalyptic, but her use of the terms bears little resemblance to the mid-twentieth-century debate. “The words ‘eschatology’ and ‘apocalyptic,’ though future-oriented, are not interchangeable,” she writes. “The key apocalyptic idea, to be developed further in later chapters, is *the sovereign intervention of God*.”³³ Later she defines apocalyptic as the belief that “the cross/resurrection event is a genuine *novum*, a first-order reversal of all previous arrangements,” and thus “not an inevitable final stage in an orderly process, or an accumulation of progressive steps toward a goal.”³⁴ Apocalyptic claims that this *novum* is a present reality now and thus “the apocalyptic perspective is ‘bifocal.’”³⁵ It sees both the present age and the age to come simultaneously. Here she invokes Martyn’s well-known idea of bifocal vision, which presupposes a “present apocalyptic” that makes no claims about the imminent future of the world.³⁶ According to this new apocalyptic, the problem with “eschatology” is not that it is *past* or *present* but that it is not wholly *new* and *divine*.

In retrospect we can see that Martyn resolved the tension within Käsemann’s scholarship. Käsemann was a kind of bridge between the old world of historical Jesus scholarship—Weiss and Schweitzer—and the new world of theological interpretation of Paul, in which normative rather than historical questions came to

32. In his response to Käsemann, Bultmann mentions the possibility of a “present apocalyptic,” but he still associates the apocalyptic concept with a mythological cosmology and so replaces it with what he calls a “present eschatology.” See Bultmann, “Apokalyptik,” 476–77.

33. Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 222.

34. *Ibid.*, 355.

35. *Ibid.*, 356.

36. J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 104. In his critique of Beker’s work, Martyn wonders whether Beker ignores Galatians because “that letter is felt to be offensive on two counts: It contains very few references to God’s future triumph, that is, to what Beker views as the core of the coherent apocalyptic core, and it can be read as revealing a conscious avoidance of—if not an attack on—the continuum of salvation history.” See J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 179. In rejecting Beker’s “apocalyptic core,” Martyn also rejects the core Käsemann discerned in 1960.

dominate the conversation, but his role as a bridge figure brought with it contradiction and ambivalence. Martyn, Rutledge, and others have clarified these tensions by developing an account of apocalyptic that highlights the present, disruptive agency of God as the defining characteristic of apocalyptic. Eschatology, they argue, generally refers to a collapse of God's future into the future actualized by the human subject. Apocalyptic, by contrast, is a view that acknowledges God's action here and now to bring about something genuinely new.

Armed with this new understanding of apocalyptic—and recognizing that recent apocalyptic scholarship has focused almost exclusively on Paul's theology of the cross—we are now in a position to turn to Bultmann, and in particular to Bultmann's reflections on God's advent in the birth of Jesus.

Bultmann's Advent Sermons

Bultmann regularly preached at the University of Marburg chapel.³⁷ Thirteen of his published homilies—delivered between 1907 and 1943—were given during the liturgical seasons of Advent or Christmas. What makes these sermons of special interest is the way they document the transformation of Bultmann's theology as a result of his conversion, so to speak, to dialectical theology in 1920—a conversion that is tantamount, I suggest, to apocalyptic theology.

Bultmann's early sermons, before his turn to dialectical theology, represent a quintessentially non-apocalyptic theology. On December 10, 1911, while working on his *Habilitationsschrift* on Theodore of Mopsuestia, he preached a sermon with the title, "What does faith in the future mean for us?" In an echo of Weiss and Schweitzer, he begins by recognizing that "early Christianity was a religion of hope," in which Christians "expected that Jesus would return as the heavenly king to establish his glorious kingdom on earth." Since their "gaze was directed only to the future," Bultmann adds, "everything earthly necessarily lost its value and all joys and sorrows faded away."³⁸ The young Bultmann, who began his dissertation under Weiss's supervision, follows his teacher's lead at this point in rejecting New Testament eschatology as normative for Christians today. He argues that this apocalyptic vision cannot be normative for us today, because "we all know we live in a great community of culture and work, and every day we enjoy its goods. . . . If we live for the future, it is a future in this world. If we believe in a future, it is the future our work creates."³⁹ According to the young Bultmann, Advent teaches us that "as much as we are committed to work, what the outcome will be is *wholly* God's gift."⁴⁰ In other words, in concert with the liberal theology of his day, Bultmann in 1911 fully accepts the collapse of God's kingdom into the

37. For more about Bultmann's advent sermons, see Congdon, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 146–59.

38. Rudolf Bultmann, *Das verkündigte Wort: Predigten, Andachten, Ansprachen 1906–1941*, ed. Erich Grässer and Martin Evang (Tübingen: Mohr, 1984), 65.

39. *Ibid.*, 66–67.

40. *Ibid.*, 74.

progress of Western culture. Here we have a genuine example of what Rutledge calls eschatology in the bad sense—a theology of the future as the conclusion to a process controlled by human beings, rather than by God’s sovereign action.

Thirteen years later, however, we find Bultmann preaching a very different message. What transpired in the interim is a story told at length elsewhere, but it involved especially his further study of New Testament eschatology, the harrowing experience of the Great War, and the decisive influence of Friedrich Gogarten and Karl Barth, both through their books and their lectures at the Tambach conference in 1919 and the Eisenach conference of 1920.⁴¹ The result of these developments was Bultmann’s embrace of Christian eschatology as theologically normative. His particular reconstruction of this eschatology under the conditions of modernity had two key features: (1) the eschatological otherness of God and (2) the eschatological existence of the human person. God is not at our disposal as an object in the world, and thus any relation between God and the world requires both a decisive inbreaking by God and a radical change in the person whom God encounters.

We see the effects of this change most profoundly in Bultmann’s sermons, particularly those that focus on texts from the Johannine corpus. On December 19, 1924, he preached on the “God is love” passage in 1 John. Instead of faith in a generic future towards which we can work, Bultmann here proclaims an *event* that has fundamentally changed the world. He begins the sermon with the declaration that “we are not celebrating an idea but an event.”⁴² An idea is something anyone can understand and possess intellectually, but the love that is God is known only by revelation, that is, by God’s initiating action. It is only “because the word of God has confronted us” that “we are able to speak about love.”⁴³ As if to denounce explicitly his earlier theology, Bultmann says that the word of revelation “does not come from our sphere” and is “not the uplifting and illuminating expression of our thoughts and desires, our ideals and aspirations.”⁴⁴ The revelation that “God is love” instead occurs as the advent of love itself, in which “what takes place there is not something that can be understood as the result of a development, not even a moral development, but rather there takes place something new, something wondrous, which is in a true sense an event.”⁴⁵ This event, he says, “has a wholly concrete content: God forgives sin.” And in this event “God makes us new; God leads us from the old, from the shadow, from death into the new, the light, the life—from appearance into reality.”⁴⁶ The active agent throughout the sermon is not the church or humanity but rather the God who loves, forgives, and makes new. Bultmann articulates a sovereign divine action that inaugurates a radical discontinuity between the old and the new. In other words, he expresses precisely

41. For a full account of this development, see Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing*, 79–111.

42. Bultmann, *Das verkündigte Wort*, 208.

43. *Ibid.*, 212.

44. *Ibid.*, 213.

45. *Ibid.*, 211.

46. *Ibid.*, 211–12.

the themes that Rutledge identifies as characterizing apocalyptic as opposed to eschatology, though Bultmann would refer to these as dialectical and liberal theology, respectively.⁴⁷

Two years later, on December 17, 1926, Bultmann preached on John 1:14, “The word became flesh.” This sermon is important because of the way it demonstrates Bultmann’s “third way” between an eschatology that emphasizes the freedom of the human subject and an apocalyptic that emphasizes the sovereign freedom of God. “The message of Christmas,” he says, “is that there is a *second beginning*; that event, ‘the word became flesh,’ is this beginning.”⁴⁸ But what is the nature of this new beginning? Bultmann here walks a fine line, as he does throughout his theology. On the one hand, this event is not a “world-historical occurrence,” by which he means something that is objectively visible for all people—like a volcanic eruption or a beautiful autumn morning—whose effects we participate in whether we choose to or not. In contrast to such occurrences, the event of Christ’s advent confronts us with “the *choice* whether this beginning will be our beginning.”⁴⁹ On the other hand, Bultmann goes on to clarify that this event is not merely a product of individual resolve or collective imagination. We come out of a particular history and are burdened by our past of hatred and mistrust, and for this reason in ourselves we belong to the old order. “We cannot get out of our hate by a strong resolve” and suddenly begin “speaking and acting in love.”⁵⁰ Only a sovereign act of God can free us for a future of new possibilities. Bultmann here anticipates Martyn’s claim that, “for all thoroughly apocalyptic thinkers, this liberating redemption does not at all grow out of the present scene.”⁵¹ Redemption arrives only as an invasive event from beyond history and is not dependent on some prior human deed to actualize it. For this reason, Bultmann writes, the advent of Christ “*is in fact always the beginning for us, whether we want it to be or not. We choose always only in which sense it will be the beginning for us. For ever since this event took place, all history has been marked by it.*”⁵² The new beginning of Christ’s advent is neither an objective datum nor a subjective illusion; it is an advent whose reality “always demands our decision,” a decision that does not constitute the

47. Earlier that same year Bultmann delivered a lecture in which he said “the subject of theology is God, and the chief charge to be brought against liberal theology is that it has dealt not with God but with humanity.” Rudolf Bultmann, “Die liberale Theologie und die jüngste theologische Bewegung [1924],” in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 4 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1933–65), 1:2. The turn from liberal theology to dialectical theology is thus a turn from an anthropocentric eschatology, as characterized by Rutledge, to a theocentric apocalyptic. What confuses many is that Bultmann uses anthropological and existential terms to articulate his theocentric theology, which leads many to assume he remains in the liberal, non-apocalyptic tradition. The problem stems from a failure to grasp the underlying dialectical logic of his thought.

48. Bultmann, *Das verkündigte Wort*, 236.

49. *Ibid.*, 237.

50. *Ibid.*, 236.

51. Martyn, *Galatians*, 100.

52. Bultmann, *Das verkündigte Wort*, 238.

reality of this event but rather confirms the truth of the advent as a truth that concerns our existence. The apocalyptic advent is objective without being objectifiable, because its objectivity requires and establishes a corresponding subjectivity—namely, faith as the “bifocal, simultaneous vision” that enables us to see “both the evil age and the new creation simultaneously.”⁵³

On December 16, 1931, Bultmann preached on the passage in John 3 where Jesus says “the light has come into the world.” Bultmann declares that “the coming of the Lord, which the Christian community anticipates in Advent and celebrates at Christmas, is not at all primarily his coming to the individual, his entering into the soul, but rather his coming to the *world*.” He seems to associate talk of the soul with the liberal romanticism of his youth: in a sermon on June 17, 1906, for instance, Bultmann had preached, “God has worked in our soul; we have now experienced that it has an everlasting value.”⁵⁴ His embrace of dialectical theology shifted the site of divine action from individual experience to the inbreaking of Christ, from God’s pantheistic presence to God’s judgment and sublation of the world—the actuality of which stands independent of one’s religious piety.⁵⁵ To illustrate this point he cites one of his favorite lines from Luther, which appears several times in his sermons: “the eternal light enters in, giving the *world* a new appearance.” He stresses the actuality of this coming when he says, “the Lord *has* come, the eternal light *has* given the world a new appearance,” and thus in Advent “we await one who has already come, who is already here.”⁵⁶ The one who came already in history comes ever again in the word that confronts us with the ultimate decision. This word—the proclamation or kerygma in which Christ is present to us today—places us before the decisive question “whether we love the light or the darkness.”⁵⁷ The arrival of the light is therefore a judgment (John 3:19). God’s light “does not illuminate the way of our desires and plans; it does not illuminate the world the way we would like to see it, . . . but rather it gives the world a *new* appearance.”⁵⁸ In agreement with recent work in apocalyptic theology, Bultmann understands Christ’s advent as an event that has cosmic significance and actualizes a total break between the old age and the new. His approach is distinctive, however, because he holds in tension the *objectivity* of advent, in which God interrupted and transformed the world, and the *subjectivity* of advent, in which God interrupts and transforms *me* through faith. This tension appears again in his sermon on December 11, 1938, in which he describes the apocalyptic power of the gospel to make the world new for those who believe:

53. Martyn, *Galatians*, 104.

54. Bultmann, *Das verkündigte Wort*, 6.

55. In 1924 Bultmann criticizes liberal theology for its “pantheism of history” and affirms instead that “*God represents humanity’s total sublation, negation, being placed in question, and judgment*” (Bultmann, “Die liberale Theologie und die jüngste theologische Bewegung,” 5, 18).

56. Bultmann, *Das verkündigte Wort*, 240.

57. *Ibid.*, 243.

58. *Ibid.*, 242.

The Gospel has the power to grant freedom from the world, because it is the message of God's grace and the forgiveness of sins. This word makes the world new for those who believe. He who is to come has in truth come and has renewed the world—renewed for those who allow themselves to be renewed by him . . . Through his coming our outlook on the world and on time is completely changed. His coming is not an event within the process of world history, which immediately becomes part of the past; rather it is an event that signifies the end of world history.⁵⁹

For Bultmann, the Christian life is thus a life of perpetual advent. To have faith is to participate in the apocalypse of Christ's coming as it occurs ever anew in the kerygma. Bultmann himself recognizes this in his sermon on December 12, 1943. There he says that "to be a Christian means to be one who waits for God's future. Hence for the Christian perhaps all seasons are essentially an Advent season."⁶⁰ The event of God's advent is one that occurs perpetually anew; each moment holds the possibility of being the occasion for Christ to give the world a new appearance.

Advent as Apocalypse

In conclusion I suggest that Bultmann's theology of perpetual advent is a genuinely *apocalyptic* theology. The caricature of Bultmann's eschatology is that it denies real divine action, is subjective in the extreme, and disregards the wider social and political world in favor of a vicious individualism. What I am suggesting here is that Bultmann's advent theology is instead premised on genuine divine action that is simultaneously objective and subjective and concerns the world as a whole.

Bultmann, moreover, does not abandon the theme of expectation that is so central to Käsemann's early work. He instead retains expectation and even makes it crucial to his theology. Bultmann translates the *historical* imminent expectation of early Christianity into the *existential* imminent expectation that is essential to Christian faith. It is this existential version of imminent expectation that Bultmann considered the "mother of all Christian theology," but he referred to this as present or realized eschatology. Bultmann opposed a very specific understanding of apocalyptic, but it was taken as a rejection of apocalyptic *in toto*. The result was a false picture of apocalyptic on one side versus eschatology on the other. This was a convenient rubric, but it misrepresented both apocalyptic theology and Bultmann. The work of Martyn and Rutledge, not to mention the later work of Käsemann himself, shows there is hardly a monolithic conception of apocalyptic operative even among its strongest proponents. If we accept Rutledge's basic definition—which emphasizes God's sovereign intervention to bring about a fundamentally new reality—then we can and should see Bultmann

59. Rudolf Bultmann, *This World and the Beyond: Marburg Sermons* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 109–10. Translation revised.

60. *Ibid.*, 210.

as an apocalyptic theologian. If we narrow the definition to exclude Bultmann, we risk also excluding others who are self-described proponents of apocalyptic.

Bultmann's distinctive form of apocalyptic theology does not operate with the usual binary options. His approach posits a paradoxical identity between theology and anthropology, objective and subjective, the cosmic and the individual; the one is impossible without the other. Similarly, Bultmann sees advent and crucifixion as paradoxically identical. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, he says explicitly that Christ's beginning and end are a single event:

The coming and the going of Jesus are a unity. Of course, his coming and his action would be nothing without his "glorification" through the passion. But this is not added to it as something new, for from the beginning it has already been contained in his coming; his death is only the demonstration of what has always happened in and since his incarnation. . . . The cross shows. . . the whole truth of ["the word became flesh"].⁶¹

The cross may be "the definitive *apokalypsis* of God,"⁶² but Bultmann ascribes this apocalyptic significance to the coming of Christ, indeed to his very person. The past advent of Christ inaugurated a new reality that repeatedly confronts us anew in the word proclaimed. But this advent is not a comfortable, kitschy Christmas lullaby that confirms the world as it is. For Bultmann the advent of God is an eschatological event that disrupts our existence. Christ's coming is not a single historical occurrence but a perpetual event constantly shattering our old self-understanding and confronting us with the new reality breaking into our midst each day, here and now. As he says in his commentary on John, Jesus is "the one who is always shattering the given, always destroying every security, always irrupting from the beyond and calling into the future."⁶³ If this is not apocalyptic, I do not know what is.⁶⁴

Author biography

David W. Congdon is acquisitions editor for political science and law at the University Press of Kansas. He is the author of *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology* and, most recently, *The God Who Saves: A Dogmatic Sketch*.

61. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray, R.W.N. Hoare, and J.K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 467–68.

62. Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 353.

63. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 560. Translation revised.

64. This article was originally presented to the "Explorations in Theology and Apocalyptic" working group at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature in San Antonio, TX, on November 20, 2016. I am grateful to Philip Ziegler and Nancy Duff for their constructive feedback on my paper and their invitation to publish it in *Theology Today*.