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NEW EVERY MORNING:
EPECTASY AS A THEOLOGY FOR INNOVATION

by
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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Luther Seminary
In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF THEOLOGY

THESIS ADVISER: DR. GARY SIMPSON

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2019

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Messiah Lutheran Church in Vancouver, WA, for their flexibility as I finished writing. Special thanks to Jennelle, who has listened to more thoughts about epectasy than any human being in the last 1500 years.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: CHANGE AND INNOVATION

It is a well-worn sermon illustration designed to elicit a reaction of fear and disgust: if you put a frog in a pot of hot water, the story goes, it will jump out. However, if you put a frog in a pot of cool water and then incrementally increase the temperature bit-by-bit, the frog is unable to detect the gradual change and will remain in the pot all the way until the water reaches a rolling boil, cooking the hapless amphibian alive. The message is clear: change kills. The wise will be alert to change around them and resist it—jumping out of the pot at the first sign of troubled waters. This folksy fable’s simplicity and ubiquity (it has even provided the title for a best-seller¹) reveal a core element of human experience: the fear of change. It could be argued that the parable of the frog is not anti-change, per-se, but instead an argument for awareness and discernment. The core elements of the story undermine such an interpretation, however, as there is only one sort of change admitted in the story: a one-way arrow from safety, to danger, to death. There is one sort of protagonist: a frog who is safe in one environment but at risk outside of it. The only character is a victim of circumstance, and the only way out of the fatal predicament is to escape the changing environment or reverse it to a former state.

¹ George Barna, *The Frog in the Kettle: What Christians Need to Know about Life in the Year 2000* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990).

The church through history has frequently found itself in hot water, roiled by changes inside and out, and no shortage of voices have emerged to encourage Christians to either escape their changing circumstances or to fight back, insisting that the only safe environment is the one that has been lost, “some lost secret which if rediscovered will restore to mankind something of the glories of the past.”² In this line of thinking, humanity’s *telos* becomes a closed loop: humanity has lost an earlier state which now becomes the end toward which we must move if our survival is to be secured. The goal is to get *back* to perfection, and then secure that perfection from any further change. The frog’s water *used to be* perfect and cool, now it has gotten too hot, and the solution is to return it to coolness and keep it there forever.

This longing for a secure and changeless future is also present, though more subtly, among those whose view of history is more linear than cyclical. For those who view history as a steady march of progress, there is also an underlying assumption of *telos*. Looking backwards, and privileging current circumstances as necessarily nearer to ideal, elements of the past are identified as non-ideal (slavery, totalitarianism, racial and sexual discrimination, etc.), and the progress of society is identified with its transformation away from its past states and into its current one. This does not mean that the present is fully ideal, only that it is necessarily closer than any point in the past, and the future will be closer still. In the end, the goal of progress is to reach a state in which no more change is necessary, because all non-ideal areas have been conformed to the ideal (i.e. the eradication of discrimination, hunger, disease, war, etc.). To return to the

² J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923), 15.

story of the frog, in the progress mindset there is a clearly identified problem (the water is too hot) and a clear solution to progress toward (cool water), with the end goal that the water stays cool. Whether the water is currently too hot because it has always been that way or because someone in the past turned up the burner is irrelevant.

In both cases the desire is to identify present states that are “not how things should be,” and change them (whether through reversion to an older ideal or a progress toward a pre-identified goal), and as those areas become “how they should be,” to lock them in place, until eventually the pieces cohere into a perfect whole, to which any alteration would be a diminution.

Like Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration, the good becomes the static, and the static becomes the good: “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings . . .” (Luke 9:33 NRSV). This attitude has shaped the church from its earliest days, and has resulted in the dominance of an eschatology of stasis. When the longing of the church becomes a longing for changelessness, a natural consequence is that change itself is viewed with suspicion, while the changeless is more likely to be guarded and celebrated. This doesn’t mean that no change is sought—after all, things are not now how they should be—but it does mean that change can only ever be pragmatic—a program that is careful to touch only those things that can be agreed to be imperfect, and only with a change that has a predefined utility.

This foundational eschatology—the longing for stasis—has profound implications for how the church encounters culture, and how it structures and regulates its internal life. While the hope may be for a perfect future safe from change, change in the present is an unavoidable reality to which attention must be paid. As G.K. Chesterton points out:

All conservatism is based upon the idea that if you leave things alone you leave them as they are. But you do not. If you leave a thing alone you leave it to a torrent of change. If you leave a white post alone it will soon be a black post. If you particularly want it to be white you must be always painting it again; that is, you must be always having a revolution . . . if you want the old white post you must have a new white post.³

Even the act of defending ideals from change will entail change as the threats to those ideals shift and morph in ever new ways.

Thus, the church sings, “Change and decay in all around I see. O Thou, who changest not, abide with me!”⁴ acknowledging that change is an ever present phenomenon—a phenomenon that is, by all accounts, “now accelerating so fast that it has risen above the average rate at which most people can absorb all these changes.”⁵ In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, “American society has undergone such a broad litany of changes . . . any comprehensive understanding of American society today must acknowledge the breadth of the alteration.”⁶ This fact has generally not been ignored by the church. Writings abound about the necessity for the church to engage in a constructive way with the changes happening around it: “The new wine needs new

³ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Company, 1908), 212.

⁴ Henry F. Lyte, “Abide With Me,” in The Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, *The Lutheran Hymnal* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), 552.

⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 31.

⁶ Marc J. Dunkelman, *The Vanishing Neighbor: The Transformation of American Community* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2014), 31.

wineskins.”⁷ “The church-in-mission is today facing a world fundamentally different from anything it faced before. This in itself calls for a new understanding of mission.”⁸

Most of this discussion has focused on the fact that change in the church is needed in order to better function as God’s church in the world (however that is defined): “Being a church for the neighborhood demands adaptation in habits and language in order to speak to neighbors that many churches are unwilling to undertake.”⁹ The discussion is largely a pragmatic one, a series of deliberate course corrections in order to keep the overall enterprise headed in the same direction it always has been, while recognizing that the currents around it have shifted: “the focus throughout the history of the church in America . . . has been on the relationship between church and culture. This has led to seemingly endless efforts to change the church in order to engage a changing culture.”¹⁰ This approach is not wrong, per se. It is true that, in order to participate in God’s mission in a changing culture, change on behalf of the participants will be necessary. However, this pragmatic approach leaves undiscussed and unchallenged the theological devaluation of change itself. It inspires Christians to try new things, experiment, and take risks *in service to* desired ends. Intentional change is a tool, but a tool that is given little value outside the demands of the present situation. It is Chesterton’s paint brush, working to

⁷ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in our Time* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015), 10.

⁸ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Twentieth Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 357.

⁹ Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2014), 7.

¹⁰ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), Amazon Kindle eBook, location 380.

keep the fence white against the forces of decay, until the day finally comes when the brush can be laid down and the fence will stay white all on its own. That day is the goal, the brush is but a necessary evil. In this view, even the most exciting innovations are only a penultimate good, as all innovation will be left behind in the eschaton, having no theological value outside of its present usefulness.

There is another stream of thought in the Christian tradition. One that sees change as an inherent part of what it is to be human, both now and forever. One that focuses not on stability but on surprise, not on changelessness but on eternal novelty. This stream acknowledges God's changelessness but also God's infinite nature, an uncreated infinity that generates the potential for a universe with unlimited varieties of new experience. Developed by the fourth century theologian Gregory of Nyssa, the doctrine of *epectasy* argues that, while not every change is inherently good, change itself is a good and beautiful *feature* of humanity. Humans will continue to experience new, exciting, and unexpected realities in their eternal life with God.

This model has the potential to dramatically reframe the church's attitude toward change. In Nyssa's theology, human adaptability is an essential part of the design, and what is to come can never be predicted by what came before. In contrast to systems which seek a return to a lost past or progress toward a future ideal, *epectasy* embraces the overflowing abundance of each moment—the inherent potential for change to reveal a new reality of God's being. The eternal life longed for is not one in which change ceases, but one in which it continues apace, even accelerates. The Christian's life is now and will always be one of continual epiphany. If this is the case, then change is viewed in an entirely different light. It is no longer a practical tool, a necessary evil, a penultimate

reality that will fade away. Instead, it is a necessary good. It is not the path of progress toward one goal, but the engine of “infinite development.”¹¹ If the church can embrace a vision of eternity that includes change, then change can be more enthusiastically embraced in the here-and-now as an embodiment of our eternal destiny.

This is not to say that all change is inherently good in-and-of itself, nor that any and all changes must be accepted simply for change’s sake. Rather, epectasy gives a theological weight to change that can shift our default attitude from one of suspicion to one of expectancy. It does not remove the need for communal discernment, nor for the traditions and resources of the past. Instead, it gives a new vision of what these tools exist in service of—a new way to imagine the future as full of surprising possibilities. In this, Nyssa’s theology of epectasy pairs especially well with the concept of innovation—a particular kind of approach to both encountering and initiating change. When explored within the framework of epectasy, the practice of innovation can become not only a practical tool, but a demonstration of God’s vision for humankind.

Defining Innovation

“Innovation” is a ubiquitous term with an ambiguous meaning. It has been defined as “creative problem solving,”¹² “applied creativity that achieves business

¹¹ J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 2004), 125.

¹² Tony Wagner, *Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change the World* (New York: Scribner, 2012), 8.

value,”¹³ or simply as “the adoption of new practice in a community.”¹⁴ What is clear is that innovation involves change. However, the change is not arbitrary—it does not happen by accident, there is a deliberative aspect. This is the first feature of innovation that distinguishes it from change-as-such. Often, innovation is in response to a particular challenge, a feeling of incongruity or tension in the way things are, an attempt at “helping people articulate the latent needs they may not even know they have.”¹⁵ However, this need not be the case. Deliberate change may also occur where a particular challenge is not being addressed, such as in the creation of a new game or a novel recipe.

This deliberation can take the form of a defined process, such as “design thinking,” a procedure “that individuals and teams can use to generate breakthrough ideas that are implemented and that therefore have an impact.”¹⁶ It can also happen in a less systematic, but no less deliberative way as daily challenges give way to new solutions, such as the development of fermentation as a solution to food storage issues. Innovation may be sparked by serendipitous events, but it only succeeds through the deliberate capitalization on those events, as in the development of penicillin. As Louis Pasteur commented: “Chance favors only the mind which is prepared.”¹⁷

¹³ David S. Weiss and Claude P. Legrand, *Innovative Intelligence: The Art and Practice of Leading Sustainable Innovation in Your Organization* (Mississauga: J. Wiley & Sons Canada, 2011), 6.

¹⁴ Peter J. Denning and Robert Dunham, *The Innovator's Way: Essential Practices for Successful Innovation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 6.

¹⁵ Tim Brown and Barry Katz, *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper Business, 2009), 39.

¹⁶ Brown and Katz, 3.

¹⁷ Louis Pasteur, speech at Lille University, quoted in R. Vallery-Radot, *The Life of Pasteur*, trans. R. L. Devonshire (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1910), 79.

The other feature of innovation that distinguishes it from change-as-such is its communal aspect. The change effected through innovation is deliberate (not random), *and* it has an impact on a community of people, not simply on an individual. Peter Denning and Robert Dunham stress that “invention is not enough,”¹⁸ arguing that real innovation lies in the ability to spread a practice throughout a culture, regardless of whether or not the core idea is new or old. For example, in 2002 Microsoft Tablet PCs debuted and failed to catch on. Eight years later (2010), Apple introduced the iPad, and within four years (2014), tablet computers were outselling both desktop and laptop PCs (separately).¹⁹ A novel idea is not, in itself, innovation. Innovation happens in the change to patterns of life as the novel idea is adopted by a community. This point bears particular significance for the church, in which the individual never exists in isolation—“the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you . . .’” (1 Corinthians 12:21).

In these two essential ways (deliberation and community), it is important to distinguish innovation from pure change (in which a state is different in any way from the state preceding it) and novelty (in which something is experienced which has not yet been experienced). The three terms may contain some overlap, yet they remain distinct. A light that flashes slowly off and then on is demonstrating change but not novelty. If the light had always been yellow but begins flashing in blue it is demonstrating both change and novelty. If the light is programmed to flash in a heretofore unseen pattern that

¹⁸ Denning and Dunham, *The Innovator's Way*, 3.

¹⁹ Statista, “Shipment forecast of tablets, laptops and desktop PCs worldwide from 2010 to 2022 (in million units),” August 2018, accessed on January 7, 2019, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272595/global-shipments-forecast-for-tablets-laptops-and-desktop-pcs/>

communicates a message to other people, the programmer and audience are demonstrating innovation. Innovation contains both change and novelty, but it cannot be reduced to either. This distinction will be important for churches navigating what faithful innovation looks like in a changing world. Mere change (whether in unthinking accommodation to or rejection of the surrounding culture) does not meet the standard of innovation if it is not carefully and deliberately performed. Similarly, an automatic embrace of anything novel simply because of its novelty (whether or not it is of any benefit to the community) is not so much an embrace of innovation as an act of desperation.

Innovation has been widely accepted as a practical good: “the solution to our economic and social challenges.”²⁰ Could it also be accepted by the church as an inherent theological good? Or is it a tool to be taken up reluctantly, in wistful anticipation of laying it down once-and-for-all? The answer depends in large part on our eschatology, our hope for the future. Are we dreaming of a time where there is no more change, or an endless journey into God’s boundless being? It is the claim of this thesis that Gregory of Nyssa’s notion of epectasy, which envisions a humanity of limitless potential continually changing and experiencing God’s infinite nature in new ways (in contrast to the mainstream theological tradition of stasis), provides a solid theological grounding for the practice of innovation in the church. In this framework, innovation is not just a practical good but an inherent part of human destiny. This realization can serve the church today as a deep and rich inspiration for encouraging innovation.

²⁰ Wagner, *Creating Innovators*, 2.

CHAPTER 2
ESTABLISHING THE LINK BETWEEN ESCHATOLOGY AND CHURCH
PRACTICE

If a case is to be made that Gregory of Nyssa’s eschatology can inspire the church today to celebrate- rather than fear and fight- change in the form of innovative practices, then a link must first be established between the church’s eschatology and the church’s practice. How do beliefs about the future influence behaviors in the present? Can new expectations yield new practices? The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen a renewed interest in how eschatological views shape the church’s work in the world—in the form of both theological and practical studies. In addition, social science research had explored the links between future expectation and present action. The results are not surprising, but are important to understanding how our views of the future might serve to help or undermine our goals for the present.

In 1966, Harvard psychology professor Robert Rosenthal partnered with an elementary school principle in a groundbreaking study on the effect of expectations on behavior. Rosenthal administered a basic intelligence test to a group of students at the school, measuring a variety of markers including information retention, vocabulary, and concept formation. Rosenthal then informed the students’ teachers that the test had been a measure to predict “blossoming,” or higher-than-average intellectual development potential. Rosenthal identified a sub-group of twenty percent of the tested students,

informing teachers that the test had classified these students as “bloomers.” While they may not seem remarkable now, he said, they were predicted to “show unusual intellectual gains” over the course of the school year.

The students did precisely that. Eight months later, all the students were retested. Those who had been marked as “bloomers” at the start of the school year had indeed bloomed. These special children showed “significantly greater gain in IQ score than did the control children,” scoring as much as 24 IQ points higher than the gains of the “average” students.¹ If this had been an experiment investigating the accuracy of a test for identifying latent potential, it would have been a resounding success.

Of course, the experiment was not about the test for “bloomers” at all. In fact, the twenty percent of students identified as “bloomers” had been selected completely at random. The results showed that teacher’s expectations about this particular group of students subconsciously shaped how the teachers behaved in their interactions with these students, and in return how those subtle behavioral shifts, guided by expectations, produced remarkable results. The impact of teacher expectations on student performance (both positive and negative) has continued to be studied, and the effects of such “self-fulfilling prophecies” on students have been validated, though the extent of their impact and their long-term effects on intelligence remain debated.²

This effect has also been studied outside the classroom. In 1990, a researcher at Tel Aviv University published the results of a similar experiment within the Israeli

¹ Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, "Teachers' Expectancies: Determinants of Pupils' IQ Gains," *Psychological Reports* 19, no. 1 (1966): 115-118.

² See Lee Jussim and Kent D. Harber, "Teacher Expectations and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies: Knowns and Unknowns, Resolved and Unresolved Controversies," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 9, no. 2 (2005): 131-155.

Defense Forces. The leaders of ten out of twenty-nine incoming training platoons were told that their platoon members had special potential. “You can expect unusual achievements from the trainees in your group,” read a letter sent to each leader. After 11 weeks of training, the experimental groups exhibited higher gains in both “theoretical specialty” (knowledge examinations) and “practical specialty” (hands-on weapons knowledge and use).³

Such studies argue that clearly articulated beliefs about the future exert a psychological influence on present behavior—in these cases, that the expectation of high student performance induces changes in the way teachers interact with their students. Religious traditions are certainly also aware of this link, frequently using future hope as an exhortation for certain behaviors in the present.

One dominant use of such hope is found in eschatology’s ability to provide comfort in difficult circumstances—seeking to reframe experiences of grief and anxiety. The author of 4 Esdras writes, “Pause and be quiet, my people, because your rest will come . . . Do not be anxious, for when the day of tribulation and anguish comes, others shall weep and be sorrowful, but you shall rejoice and have abundance” (4 Esdras 2:24, 27). Similarly, Paul writes to early Christians, “we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14). Comfort is a scripturally legitimate use of eschatological hope, but there is a danger in

³ Dov Eden, “Pygmalion without Interpersonal Contrast Effects: Whole Groups Gain from Raising Manager Expectations,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 75, no. 4 (1990): 394-398.

emphasizing comfort as the exclusive benefit of eschatology. Such a use emphasizes a radical disconnect between the present and the future, and can lead to a sort of fatalism, in which the present exists only to be suffered through, while the future provides a sort of mental escape from the difficulties of daily reality.

In response to a preponderance of eschatology that seemed to function primarily as escapism,⁴ the twentieth century saw a renewed emphasis on eschatology's relevance to life in the present world, and the vital importance of eschatology for the church's self-understanding and its participation in God's mission. The twentieth century began with the work of Albert Schweitzer and Johannes Weiss, who both stressed the importance of eschatology to Jesus' life and work.⁵ Jürgen Moltmann brought this emphasis to bear on the church in his *Theology of Hope*, arguing that, "if we would fathom its [the church's] essence, then we must enquire into that *future* on which it sets its *hopes* and expectations" (emphasis in text).⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg viewed eschatology as the lens through which Christians understand the present, for "the future is what gives the present its hidden meaning."⁷ Because of this, and because the full realization of Jesus' work is accomplished in the eschaton, Christians both anticipate and experience the reality of Christ's completed work as they participate in that work in the present.⁸

⁴ Rowan A. Greer, *Christian Life and Christian Hope: Raids on the Inarticulate* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2001), 3.

⁵ See Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 27-29.

⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 325.

⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 604.

⁸ Pannenberg, 604.

This line of thinking capitalizes on a different scriptural use of eschatology—the call to action. Jesus admonishes his disciples, “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap” (Luke 21:34-35a). Paul emphasizes the importance of holy living in the present because of the immanent return of Christ:

For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night . . . but you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober . . . and we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all . . . May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:2-23).

Such verses draw present consequences from the promise of Christ’s return, encouraging believers to act in congruence with their anticipations. In this way the church becomes an embodiment of its future hope.

As these concepts percolated at the end of the twentieth century, Lesslie Newbigin applied them to the field of mission, famously calling the church a “sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.”⁹ For Newbigin, one explicit way that the church is meant to manifest a future hope is in the area of reconciliation and unity. The message of the Gospel is one of reunion—of the promise of restored relationship with God. Christian trust in this promise of closeness to God also involves relationship with others: “the new relation with God through Christ is

⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989), 233.

necessarily also a new relation with all who share in it.”¹⁰ Thus, the disunity of the church is “the ultimate embodiment of loveless pride.”¹¹ Newbigin presents this as an inversion of the fact that future hope drives present action. In the case of the fractured church, its failure to live out the unity it claims to hope for betrays a failure to grasp the core of the Gospel. In turn, this failure damages the church’s ability to witness in the world:

It is not possible for the same group of men in one context—when facing the non-Christian world—to assert that the death of Christ is the one sufficient event by which all men may be made one family under God, and, at the same time, in another context—when dealing with one another—to assert that the event is not sufficient to enable those who believe in it to live as one family. The disunity of the church is a public denial of the sufficiency of the atonement.¹²

Thus, the crucial link between eschatology and practice is demonstrated all the more vividly when practice is shown to contradict professed hope, instead revealing a denial of hope.

Following Newbigin, missiologists increasingly embraced the idea that the church “represents the divine reign as its *sign and foretaste*” (emphasis in text).¹³ The church exists not for its own sake, but is called by God for the sake of the world, finding its identity in its eschatological hope and the imperfect enactments of a longing for God’s reign: “The church already belongs to the redeemed world...as such, it strains itself in all

¹⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church: A Defence of the South India Scheme*, rev. 2d ed. (London: SCM Press, 1960), 97.

¹¹ Newbigin, 93.

¹² Lesslie Newbigin, “The Quest for Unity through Religion,” *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 35, no. 1 (January 1955): 29.

¹³ George R. Hunsberger, “Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God,” in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. D. L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998), 101.

its activities to prepare the world for its coming destiny.”¹⁴ This language encourages a strong practical connection between a church’s beliefs about the eschaton and its practice in the present.

Scott R. Nelson demonstrates that this connection is not just theoretical, but is a practical reality in the life of American churches. A study conducted by Nelson surveyed a variety of American church organizations, and showed a link between an organization’s eschatological hopes and its mission practices: “this research project lends support to the theories that came to prominence in missiology and theology in the twentieth century that connected future awareness, hope, eschatology, and mission together. As a result of this project, it can now be said that there is empirical evidence of this connection.”¹⁵

Specifically, Nelson uses a “Missional Practices Scale” (MPS) in order to measure the extent to which Christians “engage in order to participate in God’s mission,”¹⁶ and then shows that the qualities of hope, optimism, focus on the present and future, and eschatological inclination are all significantly correlated with higher scores on the MPS. Pessimism and focus on the past are significantly correlated to low scores on the MPS.¹⁷

Clearly, the church’s eschatological vision is an important driver in its self-conception and its daily practice. So the crucial question becomes: what is the church’s eschatological vision? Here is where the conversation becomes more fractured. “A

¹⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 138.

¹⁵ Scott R. Nelson, “Time, Belief, and Mission: Examining the Relationships between Future Time Perspectives, Eschatological Beliefs, and Missional Practices in Various Christian Populations in North America” (PhD thesis, Luther Seminary, 2015).

¹⁶ Nelson, 131.

¹⁷ Nelson, 213.

definitive answer to the question, What is the reign of God? cannot be given.”¹⁸ Answers include words like “peace, justice, and celebration,”¹⁹ “freedom and reconciliation,”²⁰ or even simply “Jesus Christ and *his* future” (emphasis in text).²¹ Such concepts can prove inspiring, as Nelson demonstrates in his research, and as the tireless ecumenical work of Lesslie Newbigin displays. However, an important aspect of eschatology that has not often been discussed in the missional literature is the question of temporal experience after the eschaton—whether or not the experience of time, change, and novelty will cease or continue when the “reign of God” is fully manifest. If the church is going to use practices of innovation (which involve change) in its mission, is there a specific eschatological expectation to support such practices? Or, might the church’s eschatology undermine or even contradict the practice of innovation? These questions need to be answered with clarity.

In the research on teacher expectations and student performance, a clear, positive expectation (larger than average student improvement on test scores) influenced teachers toward behavior that supported and manifested their expectations. In missiological discussions of eschatology’s importance, there is often a danger of focusing exclusively on what will *not* be present in eternity: death, poverty, war, etc. As Moltmann points out, this leaves a vacuum in the place where inspiration should be located: “the positive

¹⁸ Hunsberger, “Missional Vocation,” 90.

¹⁹ Hunsberger, 91.

²⁰ Inagrace T. Dietterich, “Missional Community: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit,” in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. D. L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998), 159.

²¹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 17.

position does not arise magically or miraculously from the negation of the negative.”²²

As change is a phenomenon which the church, whether it wants to or not, is forced into interaction with on a constant basis, it would be beneficial for the church to examine its positive eschatological expectations on the topic, and how they relate to present practice. In short—what the church expects to happen in the future will have a psychological impact on its practice in the present, so it had best examine its hopes carefully or risk ignorance of its own motives. Calls for change in church practice cannot be properly understood or considered until an eschatologically grounded theology of change itself is articulated.

Fortunately, while this conversation has not explicitly taken place in the context of modern missiology, that is not to say that the question of change in eternity has been undiscussed in theological history. Indeed, there exists a long tradition of speculation about the nature of time and change in relation to eternity. This tradition can, then, be examined and its implications for church practice extrapolated. The dominant view of theologians through the ages turns out to be one in which change is seen as an enemy at worst, or a side-effect of sin at best, one which will finally be overcome in the eschaton. We turn next to this tradition and its implications for modern church practice.

²² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, 40th Anniversary ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 335.

CHAPTER 3

STASIS: BECOMING A BEING

The human mind is a prediction engine. The survival of our species has depended on our mind's ability to synthesize massive amounts of input into predictable patterns which can form the basis of split-second decision making. The faster a decision can be made, based on the application of past data to the present circumstance, the more likely an individual is to be able to escape danger or capitalize on an opportunity. Is the rustling in the bushes more likely to be a threat or a food source? The best-adapted mind will be able to make a judgment before it is even aware of the rustling at a conscious level. This is such an innate part of what it is to be human that our bodies do it as a matter of course. For instance, optical illusions are the result of our brain filling in gaps in our visual perception in a way consistent with how our vision usually functions, allowing us to more effectively "predict the future" while performing tasks in motion.¹ Our innate bent toward predictability is evident in common sayings like, "better the devil you know," and "a bird in the hand is worth three in the bush." It follows, then, that the more predictable an environment is, the safer it will feel, a sort of primordial pull toward reliability in experience.

¹ See, for example, Mark A. Changizi, Andrew Hsieh, Romi Nijhawan, Ryota Kanai and Shinsuke Shimojo, "Perceiving the Present and a Systematization of Illusions," *Cognitive Science* 32, no. 3 (2008): 459-503.

Change is, then, fundamentally dangerous. And the danger is felt more as an active, malevolent force working against us than as an abstract feature of life. Personifications of change and unpredictability spring up to give shape to this instinct. Leviathan (or Tiamat, or Yam) frolics in the primordial waters of chaos. The gods are capricious and as liable to stir up trouble as anything else. Even those of us in “enlightened” society are likely to glance around nervously after giving voice to an as-yet unspoken, sacred stability. A phrase like “we haven’t had an injury in ten years” is often followed by the recognition that saying such a thing is liable to draw the attention of fickle gods, and a quick act of supplication (“knock on wood”) is necessary. Much of human religion is birthed in this impulse to control the uncontrollable and predict the unpredictable.

While this personification of the danger of change is natural, so too is the personification (and deification) of its opposite. If there are gods of disorder, then there is also a need for a champion of order, a being to embody our longing for safety and constancy. Such a being could inspire hope for a future in which change is finally destroyed and the human mind is at last capable of its primal longing—perfect predictive power.

Building on the foundations of Greek philosophy, the great minds of the early church were drawn to a conception of God as timeless and changeless, a God who is moving humanity toward a similar state in which change and experience itself are swallowed up in the eternal moment of Being. Augustine famously and beautifully prayed in his *Confessions*

: “our heart is restless until it rests in you.”² For much of the church through time, the end goal of the Christian life- eschatological rest- has meant the complete cessation of new experience. In fact, this belief in eschatological timelessness has been dominant in Christian theology throughout its history.³ This hope for a changeless future has serious implications for how the church interacts with the current world of flux. If the church is to be a “sign and foretaste” of things to come, then it must resist the instability of the world and embody a sense of eternal constancy, allowing members to experience a taste, through the repetitive practice of unchanging ritual, of a timeless future.

Following Plato’s conception of God as timeless,⁴ and Aristotle’s view that change occurs due to a lack or a potential,⁵ most early Christians held that God was timeless and unchanging, because God was pure being. To say anything else would be to admit that God was deficient in some way, and thus not fully “existent” in Aristotelian terms. Speaking about God, Augustine wrote: “anything that changes cannot keep its being, and anything that can change even though it does not, is able to not be what it was; and thus only that which not only does not but absolutely cannot change deserves without qualification to be said really and truly to be.”⁶

² Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

³ Paul J. Griffiths, *Decreation: The Last Things of all Creatures* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 20, 26-27.

⁴ See Plato, *Plato's Timaeus*, trans. F. M. Cornford (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 29.

⁵ “The potential is in process to actuality, and motion is an incomplete actuality of the moveable.” Aristotle, *Physics* in Aristotle and Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 371.

⁶ Augustine of Hippo and Edmund Hill, *The Trinity* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), 191.

This presents a complication, then, for how time-bound, changeable human beings interact with the timeless, unchanging God. What is required to truly inhabit the realm of God and enjoy intimacy with the divine is a transformation of the human being to share in God's immutability. Because of this, "most ancient writers assume that the end of life in the body is also the end of human change and self-determination."⁷

Augustine expresses his hope that, in the eschaton, "perhaps too our thoughts will no longer chop and change, going and coming from some things to others."⁸ Thomas Aquinas picks up on this passage in Augustine and declares that "the angels and saints enjoying the sight of the divine Word" will possess "unchangeableness of existence and even of activity."⁹ The eschaton in this framework represents the overcoming of the barrier between change and changelessness, as the timeless Being becomes all-in-all and mutable creatures are gifted with a share in God's own immutability.

A corollary to this eschatological hope for a share in God's changelessness is that human desire and restlessness are a product of human sinfulness (albeit one that God can use to draw the wandering human back to Godself) and will ultimately be eliminated. Augustine wrote in *The Happy Life* that desire is a sign that we are not yet perfect: "As long as we're seeking and our thirst isn't yet quenched by the fountain itself and . . . by plenitude, we admit that we haven't yet arrived at our limit. Thus, even though God is

⁷ Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 222.

⁸ Augustine, *The Trinity*, 420.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas and Timothy McDermott, *Summa Theologiae: Volume 2, Existence and Nature of God: 1a. 2-11* (New York: Blackfriars and McGraw-Hill, 1964), 143.

now helping us, we aren't yet wise and happy."¹⁰ In his *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal laments humanity's constant seeking for "diversion," declaring: "I have discovered that all the unhappiness of [people] arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber."¹¹ Pascal attributes this human restlessness to "the natural poverty of our feeble and mortal condition."¹²

At first glance, a figure like the nineteenth century revivalist Charles Grandison Finney would seem to exist on an opposite theological pole. Finney was vocal about the need for "excitement" and innovative techniques in spreading Christianity,¹³ an idea his popular revivals put to practice. However, Finney's underlying theology was much closer to Augustine's and Pascal's than it might seem. While he taught and practiced the use of novelty in his revival services, this practice was ultimately, for him, a concession to human weakness. It is because people are "so sluggish, there are so many things to lead their minds off from religion . . . that it is necessary to raise an excitement among them, till the tide rises so high as to sweep away the opposing obstacles."¹⁴ This excitement is created through new techniques and practices, innovation becoming a tool for redirecting human sinfulness. Finney acknowledges the same human propensity for distraction as Pascal, and attempts to harness it rather than fight it, diverting people

¹⁰ Augustine of Hippo, "The Happy Life," section 35, in Augustine of Hippo and Boniface Ramsey, *Trilogy on Faith and Happiness* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2010), 52-53.

¹¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Penées* trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1958), 39.

¹² Pascal, 39.

¹³ Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), 9.

¹⁴ Finney, 9-10.

toward the gospel message instead of away from it. When dealing with the excitements of the world, “it is in vain to try to promote religion, except by counteracting excitements.”¹⁵ Still, he wishes that such pragmatic concessions to novelty were not necessary, and hopes that someday (perhaps in the eschaton) they will cease, dreaming of a church that can become more static: “It is very desirable that the church should go on steadily in a course of obedience without these excitements. Such excitements are liable to injure the health.”¹⁶ Under such a mindset, innovation is not a healthy experience of change, but a necessary evil—necessary only due to the presence of sin in human life.

Contemporary theologian Paul J. Griffiths likewise envisions a future of “repetitive stasis,” a state in which “there is only one type of event,” though it is infinitely repeated.¹⁷ To that end, humans prepare on earth to enter into the heavenly state through the repetition of the liturgy, the goal of which is “the radical attenuation of experience.”¹⁸ Our perceptions of self, of the passage of time, of whether or not something is new or old will all pass away. “The end of experience, for those resurrected for salvation, will be its erasure. It will not seem like anything to the saints in heaven to be who they are.”¹⁹ Paradoxically, this erasure of experience is simultaneously entrance into true existence. The saints leave the realm of becoming and, in union with God, are able to simply be.

¹⁵ Finney, 11-12.

¹⁶ Finney, 11.

¹⁷ Griffiths, *Decreation*, 22.

¹⁸ Griffiths, 236.

¹⁹ Griffiths, 236.

The end of temporal experience is the only way to achieve Cicero’s maxim of “esse quam videri” (to be, rather than to seem).²⁰

Positing stasis as the ultimate goal of human existence has a number of benefits. It takes seriously God’s transcendence and difference from creation (which includes time), allowing a strong focus on God’s unchanging nature as a source of reassurance in the midst of chaotic circumstances. Change often involves loss, and can thus be emotionally draining.²¹ An eschatology in which change is completely eliminated offers hope for absolute stability and certainty, an appealing idea in times where change feels out of control. It also imagines a way in which humanity comes into a closer union with God by becoming more like God—sharing in a part of God’s steadfast nature.

The view has a number of serious problems as well. Oscar Cullmann argues that the New Testament authors could not possibly have held such a view: “Primitive Christianity knows nothing of timelessness.”²² One evidence of this is that the word used in the New Testament to express the eternal hope of humanity is not timeless. Rather, the word *aion* (“age”) carries with it the assumption of time—it is a unit of time. Eternity is expressed as a continual succession of times—ages after ages, through the use of the phrase *aionas ton aionon*, literally “ages of ages,” though it is often rendered as some variation of “forever and ever” (see, for example, the NRSV of Revelation 22:5).²³

²⁰ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Laelius de Amicitia*, ed. J. K. Lord (New York: D. Appleton, 1887), 61.

²¹ Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 26.

²² Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 62.

²³ Cullmann, 62.

Another common expression in the New Testament is *eis tous aionas*, literally “into the ages,” again most commonly translated as “forever” (see, for example, the NRSV of Luke 1:33), though the phrase carries in it an assumption of chronology that is not captured by the word “forever.” Even Revelation 10:6 (“there should be time no longer” (KJV)), a classic text for changeless eschatology, is not concerned with ideas of immutability and is better translated, as the NRSV does, “there will be no more delay” (that is, there will come a time when God will no longer delay the eschaton).²⁴ The biblical authors do not seem concerned with trading one state of existence (or semi-existence) for another, so much as they are concerned with the transformation of the circumstances within which time is experienced.

Douglas Erlandson argues, from a philosophical perspective, that a timeless eschatology threatens to either collapse the distinction between God and humans or strip humanity of its defining features. Exploring Aquinas’ terminology, Erlandson points out that “any creature who becomes timeless and immutable must become pure actuality.”²⁵ This poses a problem, however, as something that is pure actuality cannot be changed, which means that timeless humans could not be affected by God. This limits God’s power, introducing an entity over which God has no influence. Therefore, a timeless eternity would either mean the absorption of humanity into the being of God, or the existence of multiple beings who cannot affect each other. Erlandson believes both options to be absurd, and thus concludes that “in a realm in which God exists there can be

²⁴ Cullman, 49.

²⁵ Douglas K. Erlandson, "Timelessness, Immutability, and Eschatology," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9, no. 3 (1978): 135.

only one purely actual being.”²⁶ Further, Erlandson argues that changelessness denies the very essence of human personhood: “ability to develop, learn, create, interact with other persons, have emotions, etc., are all central to personal life . . . but all these imply change. To have an eternity of *persons* and not just distinct beings demands a dynamic, changing realm, not one that is static and unchanging.”²⁷ Change is such an integral part of what it means to live a human life that an eternity without change is one in which we could hardly be said to be humans or to have life.

Most importantly for our purposes, an eschatology of stasis undercuts the value of innovation in the present. We see in Griffiths a perfect illustration of how such eschatological hopes shape present practice. For Griffiths, because the end goal is one of stasis, our liturgy does its best to model and prepare us for such stasis. Innovation in the liturgy would be incoherent—it would contradict the very purpose of the liturgy’s predictable repetition. The human desire for new experience is a desire that needs to be tamed in the present and ultimately destroyed. Under this framework, innovation should not be embraced as a theological good for the church. It should be used only if absolutely necessary (perhaps as in translations of scripture or liturgy), and then sparingly, with an eye toward the ultimate abolition of new experience.

This creates a difficult dilemma, given that all liturgical expressions are inherently culturally bound, arising as they do out of the existing language, customs, and understandings of a particular place and time. To model and prepare the church for changelessness requires the concretization of a point (or points) in time that were

²⁶ Erlandson, 136.

²⁷ Erlandson, 137.

anything but concrete. In addition, power dynamics play a large role in determining what, precisely, characterizes the eternal identity of the church. Shall the Roman church be the model? The Byzantine? The German? In the abstract, absolutely any rite could be chosen, so long as it is repeated with enough time and consistency to achieve the “radical attenuation of experience” desired. In practice, too often through history those holding political and economic power have also been those to determine what the “timeless” practices of the church should be.

In the face of this difficulty, concessions are generally made to allow for some form of contextualization. The problem is that any and every change disrupts the historic witness of the church to God’s changelessness. While change may be grudgingly conceded as a practical necessity (though among some groups it is not), it simultaneously represents a weakening of the very essence and purpose of the church. If, for example, a church were to explicitly embrace an eschatology of stasis as its hope for the future, it would be more internally consistent for that church to teach members how to speak an old language than it would be to translate the church’s practice into a new language. Only then can the church stand as a resolute witness against the constant vicissitudes of time. Only then can the church avoid becoming Theseus’ proverbial ship, changing one plank at a time until it no longer has anything in common with its original form. Such an attitude may seem unnecessarily severe. Why not seek to preserve a certain “core” from change while allowing change in all other areas?—a common enough approach. The reason this isn’t viable is that inevitably the “core” will also come under attack, because its very creation, definition, and articulation are the products of a particular context in time. As that context shifts, so too will the factors that led to the “core” seeming self-

evident. The allowance for contextualization in some areas holds open the allowance for contextualization in all areas, because it allows for the limitations of any one human endeavor to speak to all people for all time. Thus, it becomes incredibly difficult (if not impossible) for a church to model timelessness as it exists across time.

Of course, it is critical to note that proponents of eschatological stasis do not believe that the whole of present experience is perfect and should be preserved wholly as-is. While longing for a future of changelessness, they will admit that an abundance of change is necessary before such an end-state can happen. There is sin, the removal of which requires change. The primary locus of acceptable change, then, is the elimination of sin. As John Henry Newman writes, “In a higher world it is otherwise; but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.”²⁸ This concession to the necessity of moral change, however, hardly begins to address the challenges faced by the modern church or the difficulties inherent in questions of contextualization. It has more in common with modern notions of progress (discussed further in chapter 5), in which change is a carefully targeted, and ultimately finite, program.

A static view of eternity resonates strongly with human impulses toward stability and predictability. It offers comfort to those who feel themselves victims of the confusion that rapid change can provoke. However, such a view will always exist in tension with the realities of changing cultures and contexts, especially as it wrestles with how to preserve its own identity when surrounded by changes. In spite of this difficulty, the eschatology of stasis has exerted a strong influence over the church, and has been

²⁸ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: James Toovey, 1845), 39.

espoused by many of the church's leading thinkers. It is technically consistent with the Christian hope for a future in which wars, death, and suffering cease, if only because all sequential actions of any type will cease. But is this really the hope expressed in the scriptures? Will God "wipe every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 21:4) largely because a tear falling would require an experience of temporal sequence that will no longer exist?

It is true that the human mind is a prediction engine, but that is not the sum of human experience. We feel a primordial link between predictability and safety, and yet, people jump out of airplanes with only a backpack full of cloth. People sail into uncharted waters. People keep buying lottery tickets even when the best possible prediction based on all data is that they will lose. Risk and delight in novelty are also a part of human experience, an "ancient instinct of astonishment," which sees no reason "why, in the abstract, the apple tree should not grow crimson tulips."²⁹ Surprise provokes laughter, an unpredictable form of "non-order" that is nonetheless experienced as a positive.³⁰ While the eschatology of stasis views such realities as a result of sin, it is precisely this capacity for joy in the novel that provides the foundation for an alternate eschatology, one in which an infinite God becomes an infinite source of new experience—the theology of epectasy.

²⁹ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 95.

³⁰ Daniel W. Hardy and David Ford, *Jubilate: Theology in Praise* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), 96-97.

CHAPTER 4

EPECTASY: AN END WITHOUT AN ENDING

It has been estimated that, even with the aid of a supercomputer, calculating the entirety of possible moves and win-loss scenarios for a single game of chess would take considerably longer than the lifetime of the universe.¹ However, the number of possible game-opening and game-closing scenarios is considerably lower. Thus, both for would-be chess grandmasters and computers programmed to play the game, a thorough knowledge of typical game openings and closings becomes an essential piece of training. It can then be taken for granted that both players in any high-level chess match are well aware of “the book,” the term for these predictable moves. Brian Christian explains the result of this reality:

Grandmaster games are said to begin with a *novelty*, which is the first move of the game that exits the book. It could be the fifth, it could be the thirty-fifth. We think about a chess game as beginning with move one and ending with checkmate. But this is not the case. The game begins when it gets out of book, and it ends when it goes into book. Like electricity, it only sparks in the gaps. The opening book, in particular, is massive. The game may end before you get out, but it doesn't *begin* until you do. Said differently, you may not get out alive; on the other hand, you're not alive *until* you get out [emphasis in text].²

¹ Brian Christian, *The Most Human Human: What Artificial Intelligence Teaches Us about Being Alive* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), 110.

² Christian, 117.

The human mind may be a capable prediction machine, but it is the mind's capacity for the unpredictable that makes it more than a mere machine, more than a "book" of standardized responses to stimuli.

We have explored the reality of change in present experience, a situation that can prompt anxiety and a desire for perfect stability. The eschatology of stasis takes this impulse to a logical end, painting a future hope in which God (who is by nature untainted by change) grants humanity a share in timeless bliss—an eternal state in which temporality ceases. Human desire for novelty (itself a product of sin) will also cease, as the very experience of existence is subsumed into one eternal moment. Because future expectations bear a demonstrable influence on present action, the eschatology of stasis supports a model of church life that is itself as stable and unchanging as possible. To use the analogy of a chess game, for the eschatology of stasis, true existence is found only within "the book," it is the midgame (where we unfortunately now find ourselves) that is the aberration.

This causes great difficulties for a church that finds itself stuck in a present that refuses to resolve into a predictable endgame.³ If the church is to engage in "reinterpreting and renewing the church's identity and its participation in God's mission amid the massive shifts now underway"⁴ while simultaneously maintaining its role as a "sign and foretaste," then it needs an eschatological reason to "confront the need for a changed imagination."⁵ Pragmatic arguments (i.e. that a church might die if it does not

³ Although, it could be pointed out that many have tried to do just this in particular readings of the book of Revelation as a roadmap of one-to-one correspondences with modern events.

⁴ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission*, loc. 379.

⁵ Roxburgh, *Joining God*, vi.

change) will never be able to overcome the nagging feeling that such changes are a betrayal of both our ultimate hope and the nature of our God.

Fortunately, there is another theological stream, identified by Griffiths as holding “an important, if minority, place within the scheme of Christian thought,”⁶ that takes an opposite approach to both anthropology and eschatology. Developed by fourth century theologian Gregory of Nyssa, *epectasy* describes humanity’s journey not as a quest for stasis but as the continually new, ever changing experience of an infinite God. Because- unlike even the vast possibilities of a game of chess- God is unlimited, there is no “book,” no predictable beginning or endgame, only an endlessly unfolding delight in new experience. This fundamental embrace of change as a core part of human nature and destiny offers an entirely different sort of present motivation than the eschatology of stasis. If the church’s hope is that change will both happen forever and be wonderful, it may just find itself stitching together new wineskins with joy instead of reluctance.

Epectasy developed in the same fertile theological and philosophical ground as the theology of stasis. In keeping with the tradition of Greek philosophy, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-394) fully accepted that God was timeless and unchanging. In fact, this became a crucial point in his writings addressing the Arian controversy. The Arians believed that the *Logos* or Son was not eternal, but was created by the Father. One of their slogans was “there once was when he [the Logos] was not.”⁷ Gregory’s response was that this was impossible, because there is no interval of time in God.⁸ However,

⁶ Griffiths, *Decreation*, 26.

⁷ Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 132.

⁸ Smith, 132.

Nyssa breaks from the mainstream tradition in refusing to conflate the nature of God with the goal of humanity. God's timelessness does not, for Nyssa, imply that the ultimate goal of humanity is timelessness. Rather, he draws on the infinite nature of God in contrast to temporal human nature in order to envision a life of eternal *epectasy*. The term *epectasy* comes from the Greek *epekteinomai* (to stretch or strain) used by Paul in Philippians 3:13b: "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward (*epekteinomenos*) to what lies ahead."⁹ Nyssa develops a theology of epectasy on two fronts: the infinite nature of God and the infinite potential of the human soul.

In *The Life of Moses*, Nyssa establishes God's infinite nature in simple terms, using the language of limits. Finite things are marked off by clear borders: "the perfection of everything which can be measured by the senses is marked off by certain definite boundaries . . . every quantitative measure is circumscribed by certain limits proper to itself."¹⁰ These limits must consist of a reality that is different from the object or concept being limited, which means that a concept such as "good" is limited only by its opposite, what is "evil": "no Good has a limit in its own nature but is limited by the presence of its opposite, as life is limited by death and light by darkness. And every good thing generally ends with all those things which are perceived to be contrary to the good."¹¹ Nyssa then constructs a logical chain. Since God is "the Good . . . whose very nature is goodness," and "it has not been demonstrated that there is any limit to virtue except evil," he declares "the divine nature to be unlimited and infinite" due to the fact

⁹ Smith, 105.

¹⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 30.

¹¹ Nyssa, 30.

that “the Divine does not admit of an opposite.”¹² That is: good is only limited by evil, God is good with no trace of evil, therefore God is unlimited.

Nyssa develops his description of God’s infinite nature in a more exciting direction in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. God’s infinite nature as perceived by creatures is not only infinite in the sense of being never ending, the way a stream of water may seem to run infinitely but the experience of it remains identical at all times. While Nyssa does compare God’s nature to a fountain (specifically the spring that watered the earth before the flood, in Genesis 2:6),¹³ he uses the experience of the bride in Song of Songs to exposit a richer notion of infinity. The bride is continually “making her way . . . toward participation in the good things.”¹⁴ Her journey is perpetual, and “that which is not yet comprehended is infinitely greater than that which has been comprehended.”¹⁵ God’s infinite nature “is always being discovered as more novel and more surprising than what has already been grasped . . . she never comes to a halt in her desire to see, since what she looks forward to is in every possible way more splendid and more divine than what she has seen.”¹⁶ As J. Warren Smith summarizes: “God’s goodness seizes and holds the attention of the contemplative soul for all eternity because it is *eternally novel*”

¹² Nyssa, 31.

¹³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. R. A. Norris (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 339.

¹⁴ Nyssa, 337.

¹⁵ Nyssa, 339.

¹⁶ Nyssa, 339.

(emphasis in text).¹⁷ God's infinite nature becomes the foundation for an endlessly new and surprising experience of eternity.

How are limited, finite human beings capable of experiencing such infinite riches? Nyssa's anthropology posits the human soul as being capable of infinite change and development, never reaching the infinite nature of God, but existing in a state of "perpetual becoming."¹⁸ This is due to the nature of the soul as inextricably linked to a body. For Nyssa, the soul is not a separable, fully distinct component of humanity, but one part of what Smith terms a "psychosomatic unity."¹⁹ The soul and body come into being simultaneously, a "single beginning"²⁰ to a process of growth and change for both. The soul directs the development of the body and the body enables the concurrent development of the soul: "the power of the soul also appears in accordance with the condition of the body."²¹ Even as the body changes, so does the soul, and thus the soul "is by nature elastic . . . hardwired for dynamic development."²² In *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, Nyssa compares the soul to a flexible vase that expands to contain whatever is placed within it. Because God is the source of the good being poured into the vase, and God is infinite, therefore the capacity of the vase must also be infinite:

Receptacles with the faculty of choice were constructed like vases by the wisdom that sustains all things in order that there would be some place capable of

¹⁷ Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 136.

¹⁸ Smith, 150.

¹⁹ Smith, 140.

²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," in *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works*, trans. V. N. W. Callahan (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 255.

²¹ Nyssa, 255.

²² Smith, 147.

receiving these goods, a place that always becomes larger because of what is additionally poured into it. For participation in the divine good makes larger and more receptive that in which it exists . . . What is being nourished always grows and never ceases to grow . . . The capability increases as it is nourished by the abundance of goods, and the nourishing agent abounds with the increased growth.²³

The dynamism of the soul is not optional. For Nyssa, change is a necessary part of what it means to be a creature, rather than the Creator. The only option is what direction change is moving in: “stopping in the race of virtue marks the beginning of the race of evil.”²⁴ The person that is rightly oriented will engage in an eternal journey of change, constantly experiencing more and desiring more of God: “those who know what is good by nature desire participation in it, and since this good has no limit, the participant’s desire itself necessarily has no stopping place but stretches out with the limitless.”²⁵ Perfection for humans does not consist in the reaching of a predetermined end point, instead “the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness.”²⁶ This bears repeating—for Nyssa, the desire for new experience is good, so long as it is directed at God (the only being with the capacity to both satisfy and enflame that continual desire), and *the failure to continually change in this way is a moral failure*, an imperfect life, even placing one on the path of “the race of evil.”

It is obvious how different this view is from a theology that labels human desire for change as sinful, and longs for a state of eternal changelessness. Nyssa’s theology not

²³ Nyssa, “On the Soul and the Resurrection,” 244-245.

²⁴ Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 30.

²⁵ Nyssa, 31.

²⁶ Nyssa, 31.

only encourages but *expects* continual change as a fundamentally good part of human experience, both now and in eternity. Suspicion is no longer directed at those who propose change (though careful discernment is still necessary, lest the change take you in the wrong direction), but at those who would resist it.

One further component of Gregory's thought is required, however, before we can truly utilize epectasy as a theology for innovation. It is possible, perhaps even natural, to see Nyssa's theology as inherently individualistic. If human life involves the infinite contemplation of the beauty of God in ever new and exciting ways, and only God can sustain such insatiable desire, does the eschaton then consist of people wholly unaware of each other, each enjoying their own personal journey into God's boundless being?

Rowan A. Greer argues, based on Nyssa's *On the Making of Man*, that Gregory instead envisions a "corporate humanity": "'Human nature' in a strict sense applies to a single common nature . . . Just as the Trinity is a single ineffable nature with individuation, so humanity is a single ineffable nature with individuation. We are 'relations' of a single nature. An individual is to be defined not as a center of consciousness but by his relatedness to other individuals."²⁷ Thus epectasy is experienced not individually, but in relationship together, as "in Christ we find true humanity."²⁸

Imagine the countless ways in which even mundane changes in an individual life reverberate throughout the web of relationships and reciprocal influence that make up human experience. How much more complex, interesting, and exciting to imagine each

²⁷ Rowan A. Greer, *Broken Lights and Mended Lives: Theology and Common Life in the Early Church* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), 49-50.

²⁸ Greer, 50.

person in such a web experiencing the endlessly novel journey into the being of God, and having their individual experience impact and change everyone they are connected to as well. As we each encounter new and surprising depths to God's riches, we share our experience with others, creating yet more new expressions and experiences of God's infinite nature. The 6th century teacher Dorotheus of Gaza put it this way: "to the degree that the saints enter into the things of the spirit, they desire to come near to God; and in proportion to their progress in the things of the spirit, they do in fact come close to God and their neighbor. The closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God."²⁹

In sum, in Gregory of Nyssa's theology of epectasy we find a humanity that is constantly changing, being drawn together by a divine nature that is capable of infinite surprise and delight. There is no stopping point, no stasis for a humanity with infinite potential in the arms of a God with an even larger embrace. This vision of the future meets the definition of innovation: it is deliberate (guided by God) change that impacts a community of people. God is an innovator, introducing ever new transformations to God's people.

An eschatology of innovation provides a sturdy foundation for encouraging innovative practices in the church of the present. As the church lives as a "sign and foretaste," it will demonstrate a disarmingly optimistic view of change, eschewing the anxiety felt by its surrounding culture toward change, instead continually and joyfully pursuing new movements of the Spirit.

²⁹ Dorotheus of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*, trans. E. P. Wheeler (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 139.

This will only be possible, however, where such eschatological expectations are held with clarity. Recall the importance of clearly expressed expectations in the case of teachers and student performance. The strong expectation of a future increase in test performance was enough to impact the present behavior of teachers toward their students. Both the eschatology of stasis and the eschatology of epectasy can be communicated with clarity (i.e. eventually you will not change, practicing changelessness in the present is the closest you can get to heaven; or, God is infinitely surprising, you will keep changing, you can participate in this part of your eternal identity now). Such clarity will go the furthest way toward influencing present behavior. In the absence of eschatological clarity, the tendency will be to drift away from a full-throated affirmation of change as a theological good, due to the twin influences of the majority theological tradition and the general cultural anxiety toward change as potentially dangerous.

As discussed above, change can easily appear as a threat—a barrier to the brain's ability to use predictability as a tool for survival. In an environment that contains danger, stability becomes the ideal. For the eschatology of stasis, the elimination of change leads to the ultimate safety of the environment. In contrast, for the eschatology of epectasy, the elimination of danger in the environment leads to the ultimate safety of change. For stasis, change is the consequence of sin. For epectasy, the consequence of sin is the danger that scares us off from change. For Nyssa, God is the ultimate safe environment, and thus our evolutionary need for predictability vanishes. It is not the human desire for surprise that is the result of sin (a la Pascal), but the fear and suspicion that have prevented us from fully experiencing the delight in surprise we were created for. If allowed to envision God and eternity along with Gregory of Nyssa, the church will

anticipate the eschaton by creating a place for risk, experimentation, failure, and change, safe from the fear of judgment or reprisal. In the business and innovation literature, this is called a “holding environment,”: “a reliable nesting that provides a sense of ontological security, a place of trust that allows people to take risks and initiate actions.”³⁰ Before epectasy can be harnessed to this end, however, it needs to be examined in light of the historical and theological developments in the millennium-and-a-half since its conception. In the next chapter, we turn to examine just how the ancient theology of epectasy can benefit from current discussions in missiology, as well as seeking to clarify several important distinguishing features of the theology and their relevance to the modern church.

³⁰Frank Barrett, *Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 69.

CHAPTER 5

CLARIFYING EPECTASY IN A MODERN CONTEXT

If God is a tireless innovator, what does that mean for God's people in the present? Eschatology has been a key theme in the development of the theology of mission in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. What the church believes about the future will shape the way it behaves in the present, and will either enhance or limit its ability to function as a "sign and foretaste" of God's reign. The difficulty is that "a definitive answer to the question, What is the reign of God? cannot be given."¹ Despite this difficulty, the church cannot afford to leave eschatological hopes vague and ill-defined. The theology of epectasy can function as one powerful focal point for the church as it contemplates the future hopes of creation. The belief in a future of endless possibilities, of eternal transformation, can inspire the church to practice continual innovation joyfully, believing it to be a demonstration of what humanity was made for. Epectasy provides a crucial link between our belief and our practice. It is not just *what* we do but *how* we do it that matters. If our language emphasizes that changes are needed due to practical necessities, we send a message that we are just as reluctant and ambivalent about change as our congregations. If, however, innovation is embraced not as a means to an end but an end that has become a means, we present a wildly different

¹ Hunsberger, "Missional Vocation," 90.

vision of Christian life in the present. David J. Bosch laments the shift of the early church from a movement to an institution: “the one looks to the past, the other to the future . . . the one is anxious, the other is prepared to take risks; the one guards boundaries, the other crosses them.”² In Nyssa’s vision of epectasy, there is no reason to cling anxiously to the past, instead the church lives confidently, trusting that what God has in store is infinitely greater than what God has already given, “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (Phil. 3:13b). The church will expect to change, rather than fearing change.

That said, in order to fully benefit from the riches of Nyssa’s theology, a number of important clarifications are necessary before it is possible to put epectasy to work in a modern context. First, developments in missiology provide necessary insight into the possible weaknesses of epectasy, allowing the theology to be strengthened by careful attention to its potential hazards. Two such hazards (individualism and dualism) are highlighted.

Second, given the social and theological history of the last century, epectasy must be carefully distinguished from common notions of “progress,” as found in both the humanistic, post-Enlightenment belief in societal progress and the religious variations on the theme (i.e., the “Social Gospel”).

Third, the philosophical concept of “emergence” provides a useful framework for discussing how epectasy breaks from Aristotelian notions of “growth,” as it is usually understood, and instead points toward an open and unpredictable future.

² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 37.

Taken together, these three areas help to further define epectasy's usefulness in the modern world, and give the theology an additional robustness it would not have if lifted directly from the fourth century.

Epectasy and Missiology

While modern missiology can greatly benefit from the concept of epectasy, epectasy can also be strengthened by the insights of missional theology, especially in two key areas: individualism and dualism.

As discussed in chapter 4, epectasy can lend itself to a highly individualistic conception of salvation and eternity. While one solution to this problem was discussed (Nyssa's conception of a corporate humanity), it can be addressed more thoroughly by the critique of individualism offered by missiology. Current discussions of mission have been clear to identify God's very nature as communal, which creates a "trinitarian entry point"³ in the conversation about what it means to be missional. God is "a missionary God. God's communal life as Trinity is open and generative."⁴ God's action in the world is grounded in God's being, a being that is inherently relational. The trinitarian relationship is not seen as static, but as eternally sending, receiving, and enacting loving community. The term *perichoresis* is used to describe this way in which "in the eternal life of the Trinity there are simultaneously absolute silence and total whirlwind . . . each

³ Darrell L. Guder, "Missional Church: From Sending to Being Sent," in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. D. L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998), 5.

⁴ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission*, loc. 950.

person is indwelling and room-giving at the same time.”⁵ Because this is the nature of the source of all things, it is possible to state that “all life is community in communication.”⁶ The communal aspect of epectasy is strengthened by this grounding of community in the being of the Trinity. Our eternal journey *must* occur in community, because God is community. This is an important message, especially in a culture that is increasingly individualistic, viewing “piety as a route to personal expression.”⁷ Community bears within it a vulnerability, a sense of risk due to the unpredictability of other people’s behavior. When the Trinitarian insight is combined with epectasy, this unpredictability becomes a feature. Perhaps one of the major ways God will continually surprise us is in the unexpected blessings and insights that come from other people.

A second potential charge against Nyssa’s theology is its tendency toward dualism. Although Nyssa explicitly teaches the necessary unity of the soul and body (as seen in chapter 4), his thought does tend to place the intellectual and immaterial on a much higher level of value than the sensory and material. He celebrates “more attentive apprehension of hidden realities, which leads the soul to the invisible realm . . . to look upon what is hidden,” asserting that “the soul that has made its way through these stages to higher things, having left behind whatever is accessible to human nature, enters within the innermost shrine of the knowledge of God.”⁸ Such a view may have the effect of

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, “Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology,” in M. Douglas Meeks, *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2000), 114.

⁶ Moltmann, 113.

⁷ Dunkelman, *Vanishing Neighbor*, 71.

⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, 341.

taking the church's focus entirely off of God's good creation. A missional theology that strives for a holistic understanding of creation and salvation can serve as a corrective to the potentially dualistic tendencies of Nyssa's thought. As Bosch argues, "we should find a way *beyond* every schizophrenic position and minister to people in their *total* need . . . We should involve individual as well as society, soul *and* body, present *and* future in our ministry of salvation" (emphasis in text).⁹ That God is concerned with saving the *whole* creation, not just the immaterial, and that God's salvation can be experienced in both the physical and metaphysical realms is a key insight of missional theology. "The church's mission is to participate in God's mission to restore the whole creation and all of human life. If the scope of salvation is as broad as creation, our participation must be equally broad."¹⁰ Growth in the knowledge of God need not happen purely in intellectual contemplation. We can experience God's loving care for creation and action to restore it. "Healing—of mind, body, and spirit—is a sign of the work of God in the world, a sign that the reign of God is near, a sign of the love and the power of God."¹¹ Witnessing and participating in God's restorative work in the physical world can be just as much a part of our journey of epectasy as contemplative prayer, because in these moments we experience new depths of God's care and provision. However, care must be taken in exactly how such creation-affirming changes are pursued. Epectasy does not see God's mission as one of "progress," in the way it has been traditionally understood.

⁹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 391.

¹⁰ Michael W. Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History, and Issues* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 248.

¹¹ Lios Barrett, "Missional Witness: The Church as Apostle to the World," in M. Douglas Meeks, *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2000), 134-135.

Epectasy and Progress

It is important to contrast epectasy's hope for unlimited human dynamism with other notions of human progress. There are important religious and secular streams of thought that place great emphasis on human potential and development, but these should not be confused with epectasy's very specific claims about the nature of humanity and God.

The narrative of human history as a history of progress has been crucial to the self-understanding of Western culture. The Enlightenment celebrated the expansion of science and reason into ever new realms, promising an onward march into higher degrees of wealth, understanding, and quality of living (very pointedly, progress in the core values of Western culture). This journey of progress promised to envelop all people, eventually bettering the lives of everyone on the planet. Of course, as Bosch points out, in reality these ideas also resulted in greater oppression and selfishness as "enlightened" Western countries attempted to "modernize" the rest of the world.¹² Such attempts were wholly natural, since, as Kathryn Tanner puts it, within the Western framework of cultural progress "non-Western cultures do not have a past in the same way: they *are* the past—relics of a vanished age, ruins, petrified fossils, the living dead. Nothing precedes the childhood of the human race and it has no future but the West."¹³ The idea of cultural

¹² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 255.

¹³ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 41.

progress leads to a narcissism in which the one defining the progress also becomes its pinnacle.

The trauma of the world wars in the twentieth century proved a challenge to the idea of continuous progress. Dietrich Bonhoeffer surveyed the landscape of the mid-twentieth century and declared: “Nothing betrays the idolization of death more clearly than when an era claims to build for eternity, and yet life in that era is worth nothing, when big words are spoken about a new humanity, a new world, a new society that will be created, and all this newness consists only in the annihilation of existing life.”¹⁴ While Bonhoeffer was specifically targeting the rhetoric of the Third Reich, his argument implicitly undermines the entire enterprise of Enlightenment progress, which culminated in a century of incredible death and upheaval. David Bentley Hart writes: “It is rather difficult, placing everything on the scales, to vest a great deal of hope in modernity, however radiantly enchanting its promises, when one considers how many innocent lives have already been swallowed up in the flames of modern ‘progress.’”¹⁵ Still, the ideal of modernism, with its belief in the inherent progressive value of reason and science, lives on. Lawrence Krauss proclaims a “direct link . . . between the ethics that guide science and those that guide civil life . . . Five hundred years of science have liberated humanity from the shackles of enforced ignorance.”¹⁶ Humanity is seen as constrained only by the limits it places on itself, limits which are being progressively removed. A perfect future

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. C. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 91.

¹⁵ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 222.

¹⁶ Lawrence Krauss, "All Scientists Should Be Militant Atheists," *The New Yorker*, September 8, 2015. Accessed online on August 7, 2018 at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/all-scientists-should-be-militant-atheists>.

is one in which science has eliminated ignorance and provided a template for an indisputable, objective, and universally applied ethic of human civilization.

The Social Gospel movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries was similarly optimistic about humanity's potential. Placing the techniques and programs of modernism within a Christian framework, the Social Gospel envisioned the inevitable, progressive betterment of the earth: "the accent was now on salvation for life in the present world."¹⁷ Adherents saw themselves as building *The Kingdom of God on Earth* (as the title of one series of lectures from the era put it).¹⁸ The focus was on the here and now, and the ways in which the tools of modernity could be harnessed to create a better life for all. This movement also faced challenges in the aftermath of the wars of the twentieth century, but survived to make a lasting impact on Christian life, particularly in the North American mainline denominations.¹⁹ This influence is perhaps most strongly felt when a sense of Christian duty is attached to a preexisting social program. For example, a recent article on *Relevant* magazine's website was titled, "Stopping Climate Change is a Part of Following Jesus."²⁰ Such a statement links participation in the Christian life with progress toward defined social goals. Note also that it has a clearly defined endpoint: "stopping" climate change. For the Social Gospel, the "kingdom of God on earth" arrives when a selection of identified social ills are eliminated. This is the

¹⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 313.

¹⁸ Bosch, 312.

¹⁹ Bosch, 317.

²⁰ Kyle Meyaard-Schaap, "Stopping Climate Change Is a Part of Following Jesus," *Relevant Magazine*, January 3, 2018, accessed online on August 7, 2018, <https://relevantmagazine.com/current/stopping-climate-change-is-a-part-of-following-jesus/>.

problem that Moltmann highlighted—the “negation of the negative” that fails to imagine an object of hope drawn from outside the limitations of human experience.²¹

Epectasy’s claims about human potential need to be carefully distinguished from those of the Enlightenment and the Social Gospel. Such movements are not inherently bad. Being a Christian in a particular place and time might indeed entail a call to fight climate change, poverty, violence, or other evils, as the lives of so many saints throughout history demonstrate. However, this sort of desire for progress, with its specific, definable goals and outcomes, is not the same as the innovative process envisioned by epectasy. The hope of epectasy does not by any means exclude being called to social work, but it also cannot be reduced to such work. Instead, epectasy envisions a distinct mode of future existence, rather than one that is a natural progression of current experience. It is God-oriented, rather than goal-oriented, and it places a high value on epistemic humility, with an emphasis on unpredictability and the expectation of radical surprise.

While epectasy allows (and encourages) the beginning of humanity’s infinite experience of God in the present, Nyssa also imagines that the journey will become markedly different after the eschaton. J. Warren Smith summarizes Nyssa’s thought:

Although the present age and the age to come have as a common characteristic the soul’s endless contemplation of God, [Nyssa] acknowledges that the model of erotic desire that characterizes our present love of God will be outmoded in the eschaton. In his eleventh homily on the Song of Songs he writes that in the age to come when heaven and earth have passed away and our knowledge is not as it is now, “we will fully comprehend the form of the ineffable beauty according to a

²¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 335.

different mode of enjoyment, the nature of which has not yet entered man's heart."²²

While the journey of epectasy begins now, the anticipation is never for something that can be achieved on earth, for two reasons. First, the ultimate fulfillment of what the journey itself looks like is found only in the eschaton. Because of the distinction between the present world and the world to come, an embrace of epectasy does not lead to an assumption that any doctrine, practice, or experience that is newer in time is automatically better. The presence of sin in the world precludes the possibility of making such a simplistic assumption. Second, there is no "achievement" to be had, as such; no goal that can signal a stopping point.

Rather than being goal-oriented, epectasy is thoroughly God-oriented. The focus of the Christian life is firmly on God's being with its capacity for endless wonders, rather than on the moralistic development of the self or of society. Such developments are bound to occur, but they are the byproducts of the process rather than the process itself. A focus on relationship with God through the person of Jesus Christ leads to a hesitancy about bold future predictions or expectations, preferring instead to let God take the lead: "Hence the question whether all statements about the future are grounded in the person and history of Jesus Christ provides it with the touchstone by which to distinguish the spirit of eschatology from that of utopia."²³

Because of this focus on God and openness toward the future, epectasy contains a necessary emphasis on surprise. Our future will contain "a different mode of enjoyment,

²² Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 211.

²³ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 17.

the nature of which has not yet entered [the human] heart,” and so even now we should be exhibiting a profound epistemic humility. What we know, how we know, and the value we place on such knowledge are all eternally incomplete. Such a humility will continually seek the leading of the Spirit as it brings a relationship with God to bear on the daily practice of Christian life, because the lessons and tools of the past may or may not be what are needed for the present. Such a life is radically dependent on the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the community. This is quite different from looking to the needs of the world (or ourselves) to define where we will grow. Instead, we look to God and are continually surprised by the unexpected ways in which the changes God stirs among us serve the world.

This God-centered, unpredictable approach to human experience has the effect of tempering the narcissism inherent in narratives of progress. Because there is no blueprint, it is not possible to judge whether one is closer to “the ideal” than another (as “closer” becomes a meaningless term). While it is still possible to discern areas of human life that are counter to God’s good intentions, it is not possible to predict what a particular individual or communal experience of God’s work will look like, making it harder to cast judgment or assign levels of maturity to one Christian over another based solely on outside observations.

Epectasy and Emergence Theory

There are inherent language difficulties when speaking about epectasy. These difficulties spring from the common associations of the words that surround discussions of eschatology. Words like “growth,” “development,” “progress,” and “journey,” though they are frequently used when describing epectasy, all contain assumptions that run

counter to the spirit of the theology. This difficulty goes all the way back to the Aristotelian conception of “growth” as inherently teleological. For Aristotle, growth in organisms is the result of an internal force or principle which drives them to actualize the specific potentials already inherent in themselves. He termed this growth principle *entelechy*, the force that causes the development from an immature state to a mature one, according to the comprehensive roadmap that was already present in the entity from the beginning.²⁴ To state that something is “growing,” therefore, is to state that it is becoming more like a predetermined ideal. This understanding of growth persists. A young tree is “growing” if it is becoming more like an old tree—larger, with more branches and denser foliage. In human life, “growing up” refers just as commonly to an individual’s ability to conform to the established behavioral and emotional values associated with maturity as it does to physical features. Because of this linguistic baggage, it is difficult to find terms to describe precisely what is happening in epectasy. “Growth” and “development” both raise the question “into what?” “Progress” and “journey” raise the similar question “to what end?” Epectasy stubbornly refuses to answer these questions, grounded as it is in God’s infinite and therefore uncharted being. Rather than an internal, finite entelechy, epectasy posits the ultimate source of human change as an external, infinite God.

Gregory of Nyssa uses the word “growth” prominently in several important passages. In *The Life of Moses*, he writes that “the perfection of human nature consists

²⁴ Philip Clayton, “Conceptual Foundations of Emergence Theory,” in Philip Clayton and Paul Davies, *The Re-emergence of Emergence: The Emergentist Hypothesis from Science to Religion* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5.

perhaps in its very growth in goodness.”²⁵ In *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, human capacity expands because of the infinite nature of God poured into it, enabling “increased growth.”²⁶ Yet, such “growth” can hardly be of the Aristotelian, teleological sort, given that Nyssa also describes it as “always being discovered as more novel and more surprising than what has already been grasped.”²⁷ What Nyssa seems to be describing is more existential than teleological. He does make value judgments between successive states of being: “she never comes to a halt in her desire to see, since what she looks forward to is in every possible way more splendid and more divine than what she has seen,”²⁸ but the value is determined solely by the experiential relation of one state to another and not by reference to an objective, preestablished ideal. To say that an experience is “more divine” could lend itself to a teleological interpretation (the present looks more like God than the past), were it not for Gregory’s insistence on God’s infinite nature, which allows for no limits on God’s goodness and therefore no ability to make such judgments. The experience Nyssa is describing, therefore, can only *seem* “more divine” from the point of view of the human, their capabilities having been expanded to apprehend “more” of God, but it is impossible for “more” of infinity to become a fixed point of teleological focus.

A more precise term for what Gregory of Nyssa is proposing was developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and has continued to be an important point

²⁵ Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 31.

²⁶ Nyssa, “On the Soul and the Resurrection,” 244-245.

²⁷ Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, 339.

²⁸ Nyssa, 339.

of discussion for both philosophers and scientists: “emergence.” While emergence has a variety of expressions and continues to be a highly contested topic, one of its generally agreed upon features is “irreducibility”: “Emergent properties are irreducible to, and unpredictable from, the lower-level phenomena from which they emerge.”²⁹

Emergentism suggests that, even given an exhaustive knowledge of the laws of physics and the position of every particle in the universe, there will be outcomes that are surprising and can be known only through the observation of these higher-order properties, rather than predicted from knowledge of the lower-order. Two commonly used examples of such emergence are life and consciousness.³⁰ This offers a crucial insight for understanding Nyssa’s conception of epectasy. For Nyssa, no one experience or insight can ever be exhaustive of God’s nature or comprehensively predictive of future revelations. Michael Polanyi pointed to consciousness as an emergent, higher order of being than particle interactions: “mind is the meaning of certain bodily mechanisms; it is lost from view when we look *at* them focally.”³¹ Similarly, God’s nature is of a higher order than human capacity for prediction, an infinite and unimaginable order into which humans are invited, but which we will never fully grasp. “Emergence” captures well Nyssa’s vision of an existence that is still rooted in the known details of human life, but also continually transcends them in ways that cannot be predicted. Emergence is a more useful term than growth for describing what is happening to the human being in Nyssa’s thought.

²⁹ Clayton, “Conceptual Foundations of Emergence Theory,” 2.

³⁰ See Clayton, 16.

³¹ As quoted in Clayton, 17.

Unfortunately, the term “emergence” cannot be used with such precision in conversations within the church today. This is due to the unrelated conversations about “emergent Christianity”—a vaguely defined term for a bundle of religious trends beginning in the late twentieth century. Writing in 2010, Shane Claiborne, an author often identified with the “emerging church,” writes that he finds the term unhelpful, as it describes

a very confusing trend within the contemporary renewal happening in the Church. About a decade or so ago, a bunch of young, mostly white evangelicals started seeing similar conversations beginning to spark all over the place about the reshaping of evangelicalism, the rethinking of missions, and reimagining what it really means to be the church. Language of “the emerging church” connected many of the dots, which remained primarily white evangelical men, many of whom had great ideas and led vibrant communities and organizations. Nonetheless it has always been evident that this is not the whole conversation or renewal happening in the church.³²

Because of this phenomenon, the term “emergent” in religious circles has become loaded with meanings that are far beyond the field of philosophical emergence. If it is going to be used, it must be used very carefully, and distinguished from the tangle of religious threads it has become associated with.

Defining Epectasy for the Modern Church

In light of the above, a more comprehensive definition of epectasy and its implications for the church can be given. A theology of epectasy that is ready to serve in a modern context will be:

³² Shane Claiborne, “The Emerging Church Brand: The Good, the Bad, and the Messy,” *God’s Politics, a Blog by Jim Wallis and Friends*, April 13, 2010, accessed online on January 12, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111021064907/http://blog.sojo.net/2010/04/13/the-emerging-church-brand-the-good-the-bad-and-the-messy/>.

1. Trinitarian—Grounded in the communal being of God, it envisions eternity as a community experience, not an individualistic one.
2. Holistic—In recognition of the whole of God’s creation, it sees God at work in areas of the physical, mental, and emotional.
3. Eschatological—Admitting the present reality of sin, it looks for a future inaugurated by God that will look fundamentally different from the present, even as we seek to live as a “sign and foretaste” of that future in the present. This future will contain a continual experience of change.
4. God-oriented—Drawing from an ever unfolding relationship with the infinite God, it will not be defined by cultural assumptions of what change should look like, or what areas are most worthy of change, instead being continually Spirit led.
5. Open to surprise—Being led by the Spirit, it will expect the unexpected, demonstrating joy in the ways that God’s work and nature are unpredictable. It will be slow to judge others, due to the knowledge that God works in surprising ways.
6. Emergent rather than progressive—Combining points 4 and 5, its aims will not be a blueprint for social change or a ladder of moral perfection. Instead, it will encourage the church to prayerfully discern and celebrate the ways God is bringing the unexpected out of the midst of the everyday.

Such a theology has the potential to serve as a fertile ground for church practice. Specifically, it allows for innovation (deliberate change effecting a community) to be encouraged as a central component of being a “sign and foretaste” of God’s coming

kingdom. A church that fails to evidence continual change will be failing to live up to its eschatological vision. In the next chapter, we will explore ways in which this theology can be introduced into the day-to-day practices of the church.

CHAPTER 6

EPECTASY IN CHURCH PRACTICE

Innovation is most often encouraged—both in society at large and in the church—on the basis of practical necessity. Bold changes are necessary to confront the challenges of the present. Innovation is “the solution to our economic and social challenges.”¹ For the church, the clear and rapid changes of the last century call for change: “The unraveling occurring in the church bodies that were shaped by Euro-tribal Christianity requires them to engage in systemic change with respect to their ecclesiologies, polities, and practices in order to participate in God’s mission more fully.”² Such pragmatism is theologically grounded. After all, God demonstrates a radical willingness to engage with the particulars of human culture: “God moves into the neighborhood, into the particular and the local, to bring us and all people into right relationship.”³ Because this is God’s nature, it follows that “God is continuously calling people into a new way of interpreting and experiencing the world—one of the primary needs facing the church in a secularized culture today.”⁴ Such reasoning is true and is a necessary part of the conversation about

¹ Wagner, *Creating Innovators*, 2.

² Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participating in God’s Mission*, loc. 5340.

³ Zscheile, *Agile Church*, 45.

⁴ Zscheile, 45.

how the church engages with its surrounding culture. However, these arguments are also limited by their reliance on the world as the primary driver of- and reason for- change. This leaves open the possibility that, ultimately, change will no longer be necessary, as God will usher in a perfect kingdom, a new society that no longer undergoes such radical shifts, but instead mirrors God's unchanging nature. Gregory of Nyssa's theology of epectasy provides a framework for viewing change not only as a necessary response by the church to a changing culture, but as a gift from God to human culture, one that can be embraced and modeled by the church.

How might the church go about drawing from this theology at a practical level? How can such admittedly academic and esoteric discussions be put to use in the daily life of God's people? This chapter will begin to explore some of the possible applications of epectasy to local parish life. First, it will address how epectasy can provide a clarity of hope (a critical factor in motivation), how epectasy can address common attitudes toward change and underlying anxieties about change, working through fears to create a safe "holding environment" for innovation. Finally, the chapter will turn to one of the most visible practices of the church's life together, and examine how the hope of epectasy can be integrated into the practice of the liturgy.

Examining Eschatological Motivations

In chapter 2, it was argued that future expectations have an impact on present practice, even if the impact is often unconscious. Because of this link, it is important for Christians to examine their hopes for the future, so that they are not subject to motivations of which they are unaware. While the dominant tradition in academic theology has been the eschatology of stasis, it seems likely that lay Christians in America

have a more complicated impression of life after death. In a 1988 Gallup/Newsweek survey, Americans were asked a series of questions about what they believed life after death would be like.⁵ In the survey, seventy-seven percent of respondents believe that “one will grow spiritually” in heaven, and seventy-four percent believe that “there will be humor,”—certainly not realities compatible with a static heaven. The respondents make a sharp distinction, however, between the spiritual and the physical. Only forty-three percent of respondents believe that “people will have human form.” This spiritual/physical divide may account for why a significantly lower percentage of respondents (though still a majority- sixty percent) believe “people will grow intellectually” as opposed to growing spiritually. Only four percent of respondents believe heaven will be “boring.” Clearly, there is some room here for dynamism, but the divide between the spiritual and material and the disjunction between current experience in “human form” and whatever form people will have in heaven also complicates the picture. If there is such a divide between present and future experience, it becomes hard to draw motivation for present activities from the hopes of the afterlife.

As we have seen, while epectasy does expect a different form of existence in the eschaton, a “a different mode of enjoyment,”⁶ it is a distinction more in magnitude than in kind. The “human form,” for Nyssa, is precisely what has been created to experience God’s infinite riches for eternity, and it is a journey that begins in the present. “Spiritual growth” cannot be divorced from intellectual, or even physical development, because the

⁵ Kathleen Weldon, “Paradise Polled: Americans and the Afterlife,” Huffingtonpost.com, published on June 15, 2015, accessed online on January 21, 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kathleen-weldon/paradise-pollled-americans_b_7587538.html

⁶ Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 211.

human person is a united entity. When enhanced by the explicit rejection of dualism in modern missiology, epectasy provides a valuable focal point for the discussion of Christian hope. Put simply, epectasy envisions a future of continued *human* existence in which change is experienced continually and as a good. This process of dynamic experience of God begins now.

This is a valuable conversation for the members of individual parishes to have, and can be begun by simply asking the question: “what do you think heaven will be like?” As congregants begin to offer ideas, the conversation can be gently guided into noticing inconsistencies or difficulties. Alternately, the question can be asked: “do we think there will be change in heaven?” If the majority respond positively, the natural follow up question becomes, “does that mean that change is good?” This can then be pursued in missiological terms, if the church is meant to be a “sign and foretaste” of the kingdom to come, how is our particular church modeling (or denying) this aspect of heaven in our current practice? Having such conversations is vital, because in the absence of eschatological clarity, common assumptions about change will undermine attempts at innovation in the church.

Common Assumptions about Change

Encouraging change in a congregation is difficult, in part because of the deeply felt assumptions that go along with the topic. Epectasy presents a unique view of the role of change in human experience, and it is well suited to address three major assumptions that are sure to underlie most conversations about change in the church.

Chapter 3 explained how the eschatology of stasis results in a resistance to change in the present, with one major exception: sin. It is uncontroversial to state that the present

world is not ideal, that there are areas of individual and corporate life that run counter to God's good intentions. These areas of sin then become the most appropriate venue for change—in order to move them closer to an ideal state in which change will no longer be necessary. It makes sense, then, that one of the most common ways that change is discussed within the church in a positive way is in the field of piety, of personal transformation away from sinfulness. “Do not be conformed to this world,” we are reminded, “but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). We celebrate stories of people overcoming sin in their lives, and our salvation is revealed in such stories: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly” (Titus 2:11-12). The identification of sin, repentance, and transformation are undeniably important elements of Christian life together. The problem arises when this becomes the only context in which change is celebrated. This creates an implicit assumption that, where change is necessary, it is because of “impiety and worldly passions.” In other words, for many Christians, when they hear that they need to change, they hear an accusation that they are doing something wrong. Thus, attempts at change are often met with immediate defensiveness, because the suggestion of change is also a loaded accusation of error.

Epectasy lays a foundation for rejecting the false dichotomy of perfect/changeless vs. sinful/changing. It celebrates the human capacity for change as a fundamental good, one that humans would possess regardless of sin—not primarily a tool for sanctification.

Epectasy allows for a congregation to hear the simple truth—to be invited to change does not necessarily mean that you are doing anything wrong.

Even if this implicit connection of change with blame and sin can be overcome, there remains a second assumption: that change will represent a loss. “People do not resist change, per se. People resist loss.”⁷ In fact, it is often the case that change does represent the loss of a previous way of being. Particularly for people who have experienced great milestones of their lives within a particular tradition, talk of change carries with it the threat that they will lose all that they hold dear, the patterns of community that have meant so much to them. Some nuance is necessary here. It would be disingenuous to attempt to assuage fearful people that everything can remain just the way they know and love, while also trying to encourage change. However, it is possible to present the Christian hope for continuous change in a way that respects the importance and continuing impact of the past. Dwight Zscheile calls such an approach “traditioned innovation”: “What is required today is *traditioned innovation*. Innovation must remain rooted in the riches of Christian wisdom and practice from other times and places in order to offer deep, sustaining, faithful gospel witness.”⁸ It is important to stress that the journey of epectasy is not one of continual upheaval, but one of natural growth.⁹ The past is not obliterated but built upon. While it would be dangerous to attempt to freeze any one point in time, it is equally dangerous to attempt to reinvent every new day from scratch. While Nyssa may imagine that each new day with God is “in every possible way

⁷ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 11.

⁸ Zscheile, *Agile Church*, 6.

⁹ Or, better, emergence (see chapter 5).

more splendid and more divine”¹⁰ than the last, that does not rob the good from the present moment. At any given moment, it is possible to affirm that what we have is very good, while also believing that it can be very good in ever new and surprising ways.

In fact, it is the good of the past and present that contributes to the greater good of the future. In Isaiah 43:18-19a, God proclaims to a discouraged people: “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” This passage certainly seems to support change as a way of leaving the past behind. It is balanced, however, only three chapters later in 46:8-10: “Remember this and consider, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention.’” Read together, the call of Isaiah is both to anticipate God’s “new thing,” and to ground our hope in the ways God has revealed God’s good purposes throughout history. Thus history and tradition play an important role in *how* the church is able to anticipate a new future. The discussion is never “an either/or, tradition *versus* innovation. It must be a both/and. We are called to bring forth treasures new and old.”¹¹ An embrace of innovation is not an automatic death sentence to all prior ways of doing things, nor is it a repudiation of the way things have been done in the past. In fact, ancient traditions can become important tools in how the church anticipates and enacts change in its day-to-day life. For instance, the practice of *lectio divina* provides a way of listening for scripture to

¹⁰ Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, 339.

¹¹ Zscheile, *Agile Church*, 8.

speaking a new word in the present moment.¹² While there may be loss that comes with change, there are also opportunities to celebrate and draw from the past. When applying epectasy to the life of the church, a congregation can be assured that God is not seeking to rob them of the things that give them meaning, but to continue to cultivate that fertile soil. This may still cause fear, but is a more contemplative, productive fear. Rather than allowing the Christian to target a particular person or program as the object of their fear and resistance, epectasy invites individuals to consider that their fear is ultimately a fear of God—specifically, of what God might be up to in their lives. To submit to this fear and reject change is to reject the purpose of God. The ultimate question becomes one of trust—can we trust God to work for our ultimate good? Can we trust that the God who gave us the good things we treasure can deliver even more?

This question ties directly to the third common assumption about change: that it is inherently dangerous. As discussed in chapter 3, predictability is a survival advantage, and the human brain does its best to make lightning-fast predictions and capitalize on consistency. It therefore feels inherently safer to develop an environment that is as stable and unchanging as possible. The eschatology of stasis answers the element of risk inherent in change by removing change, producing a perfectly safe environment. Epectasy, in contrast, envisions the removal of the dangers of the environment (sin in the world) as the ultimate solution to make change perfectly safe. In the church, as in other organizations, change is often seen as dangerous due to the possibility that the change will have an unforeseen negative impact on the organization—in short, because of the

¹² See Roxburgh, chapter 6 for an example of using the basic format of lectio divina to encourage listening for God's "new thing."

fear of failure. A church that utilizes epectasy is well equipped to shift from fear to trust and create a “holding environment,” “a reliable nesting that provides a sense of ontological security, a place of trust that allows people to take risks and initiate actions.”¹³ A holding environment is a place where risk is celebrated and failure is not punished. This provides the security necessary to address tough circumstances: “In a holding environment . . . people feel safe enough to address problems that are difficult, not only because they strain ingenuity, but also because they strain relationships.”¹⁴

These strains are made manageable by the underlying knowledge that one’s membership in the group and personal worth are not at stake. Mistakes will happen, but they will happen in a context of mutual support and encouragement, with the full understanding that mistakes are a necessary part of the process of discovery and innovation while we are living in a sinful world. In the framework of epectasy, God is inviting us to experience new ways of being with God and with each other. In the present, this necessitates an openness to change, as well as an acknowledgement of our own limitations. Sometimes we will miss what God is up to. Sometimes we will move in the wrong direction and need to be corrected. However, if we aren’t open to these risks, we will certainly miss out on God’s current and future work.

The church seems like a natural fit for creating a holding environment. After all, don’t we already accept human fallibility and God’s abundant grace? Unfortunately, church is too often a place where people feel particularly unable to take risks or share failures. In a survey of young adults ages twenty-three to thirty who had ceased attending

¹³Barrett, *Yes to the Mess*, 69.

¹⁴ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 103.

church, thirty-two percent gave the reason: “church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical.”¹⁵ If the joyful dynamism of epectasy is to be modeled in a church, it will need to take efforts to create an environment where judgmentalism is abandoned, and openness to new experience is celebrated. This is a culture change, and one that won’t happen overnight. For many church members, the primary contact point with the church’s teaching and practice is the weekly liturgy. In what ways might the idea of epectasy be embodied in the liturgy, which in turn shapes the expectation and practice of the people?

Epectasy and Liturgy

Is there room for innovation in the liturgy? As we have seen, the answer depends on one’s view of the eschaton. What is the end toward which we are longing? How does our worship anticipate that goal? If heaven is a novelty-free realm of “repetitive stasis,”¹⁶ how might our worship reflect that hope? We may equate change with pain and suffering, singing, “Be still my soul; when change and tears are past, all safe and blessed we shall meet at last,”¹⁷ or “Change and decay in all around I see. O Thou, who changest not, abide with me!”¹⁸ We may want to shape our worship to model the steadfast changelessness of God, crafting a liturgy that remains the same week in and week out,

¹⁵ Aaron Earls, “Most Teenagers Drop Out of Church as Young Adults” LifeWay Research, January 15, 2019, accessed January 21, 2019, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/>

¹⁶ Griffiths, *Decreation*, 21.

¹⁷ Catharina von Schlegel, “Be Still My Soul,” trans Jane Borthwick, in The Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, *The Lutheran Hymnal* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), 651.

¹⁸ Henry F. Lyte, “Abide with Me,” in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, 552.

creating a reliable sense of comfort and routine, “the radical attenuation of experience.”¹⁹ We may anticipate that we will be changed by the liturgy (at least in areas of sinfulness that need changing, but only until we are made perfect in the eschaton), but not that the liturgy itself will change.

On the other hand, if we accept with Gregory of Nyssa that, while God is changeless, God is also infinite, and our final state as humans is not one of stasis but of “infinite development,”²⁰ how might our worship model this hope? In this case, change is no longer an enemy, but an experience we can expect to continue for eternity. Innovation, with its emphasis on transformation and group dynamics (“the adoption of new practice in a community”²¹), can be seen as a companion—a tool for understanding and celebrating our eternal destiny. In our worship, we will expect not only that we will experience individual change in areas of sinfulness, but that we will experience continual change in surprising ways. As we change, we will change others (and they us), and we all together will transform the liturgy itself—an ever-evolving manifestation of our transformational experience of God’s infinite being. We might be more attentive to the new ways God is working every day—“morning by morning, new mercies I see.”²²

Innovation applied to liturgy does not mean novelty for novelty’s sake, or the complete reinvention of ritual from scratch. It is, instead, an openness to surprise and to

¹⁹ Griffiths, *Decreation*, 236.

²⁰ Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 125.

²¹ Denning and Dunham, *Innovator’s Way*, 6.

²² Thomas O. Chisholm, “Great is Thy Faithfulness” in Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Pew ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 733.

greater wonders than we have yet known. This section will address some of the difficulties of applying the term “innovation” to liturgy, and then will offer up a few suggestions for ways in which existing liturgical orders could incorporate practices (drawn from historic practices) to model Gregory of Nyssa’s celebration of our “capacity for infinite growth.”²³

Liturgy and Anthropology

As we have seen, there is certain skepticism that greets the concept of innovation, especially the idea of innovation in liturgical practice. This is due in part to the assumptions about change discussed above. If change is a dangerous (and ultimately doomed) experience, it makes sense to view human desire for change or new experiences as inherently sinful.

But what if the natural human desire for progression, for cultivation, for the excitement of new experience is not a regrettable effect of sin but part of God’s design for humanity? What if the ability to change is a capacity and not a deficiency? Perhaps the heart is “restless until it rests in [God],”²⁴ but even that rest still retains a sense of emergence, curiosity, and infinite possibility. Gregory of Nyssa’s theology of epectasy allows us to embrace a theological anthropology in which desires for new knowledge or experience are not sinful but are, in essence, a built-in desire for God. “Since . . . God is infinite in nature, he is an inexhaustible source of new knowledge. God will always be revealing further partial knowledge of himself, which both satisfies the soul and arouses

²³ Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 127.

²⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.

further longing for him.”²⁵ This continual longing should not be rebuked as a weakness, but celebrated and nurtured in our liturgy. This becomes all the more urgent given the human propensity to minimize risk and maximize predictability, as demonstrated by Franz Kafka’s liturgical parable: “Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony.”²⁶ This reality calls not simply for a momentary liturgical renewal (which will become tomorrow’s liturgical rule) but for liturgical practice that expects continual reformation.

What Is the Liturgy For?

This brings up the question of what, exactly, our liturgy is for. In *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*, Gordon Lathrop explores the meaning and role of liturgy in the life of the church. Lathrop writes that liturgy is never meant to be a rote, comfortable routine: “its goal must never be the creation of an intimate group, at home with the liturgy.”²⁷ Instead, liturgy presents us with “an utterly new way to understand the world”²⁸ through rituals that point away from themselves to a larger order and truth.²⁹ The goal of liturgy is transformation: transformation of the participants, of the society, and of the received liturgical materials themselves.³⁰ It is a key point that “the dominion

²⁵ Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 134.

²⁶ Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 93 as quoted in Fred B. Craddock, *As One without Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 21.

²⁷ Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 120.

²⁸ Lathrop, 32.

²⁹ Lathrop, 26.

³⁰ Lathrop, 222.

of God . . . is not what had been expected,”³¹ and therefore the liturgy itself should model the challenging and transforming of expectations. Lathrop emphasizes that one key way the liturgy does this is through the use of juxtaposition. Two elements that participants think they know or understand are placed beside each other in tension, producing new insights. The two elements become “mutually reinterpreted,”³² spinning out new meanings through their continual interplay. Lathrop lists examples such as old ritual with new meaning, Sunday and the seven-day week, word and meal, and praise and beseeching. Perhaps to his examples we could add a juxtaposition of stability and innovation, or of an unchanging God who creates an ever-changing universe. For Lathrop, these juxtapositions are full of such creative friction that they propel us beyond themselves into new and uncharted territory. In this way Christian worship is “world upsetting,” even as it uses religious materials drawn from the world.³³ Lathrop’s liturgical theology resonates deeply with Gregory of Nyssa’s theology of epectasy. The goal is never stasis, but continual transformation. It is in these moments of new insight, of deeper meaning, of innovation, that we most experience the nature of God’s unpredictable kingdom.

This does not mean that we cavalierly jettison our history of practices. After all, “we have nothing else.”³⁴ Rather, we ought to expect our old practices to take on new and unexpected meanings, to be challenged and transformed even as we are, to be set

³¹ Lathrop, 25.

³² Lathrop, 55.

³³ Lathrop, 27.

³⁴ Lathrop, 27.

next to new practices in ways that illuminate a previously unexplored darkness. A liturgy that embraces innovation as a key component of what it means to prepare for eternity will seek to model change as a necessary component of the emergent kingdom, but never as an end in itself. It will not reinvent worship from whole cloth with every service, but carefully and deliberately use the materials of the community to point toward moments of unpredictability and surprising transformation.

If we take this seriously, the goal of an “innovative liturgy” will not be to impress with flashy gimmicks or follow the latest fads. The call for an innovative liturgy is not quite the same as (though it may overlap with) calls for liturgical renewal—which place the emphasis on specific rituals and practices and proposed changes. It will instead be a liturgy that is crafted to enhance a sense that innovation is a theological virtue, that the infinite nature of God means we can never resign ourselves to complacency, but must be ready to be continually surprised and changed. What follows are but a few examples of the ways churches through history have done this.

Music and Innovation

According to Lathrop, in the development of Christian liturgy “the new was not drawn from other sources than the old. The particular characteristics of Christian gatherings were not new inventions but rearrangements and new relationships within old material.”³⁵ Perhaps one of the easiest ways to model this continual development that draws on the familiar in surprising ways is in the medium of music. Musical improvisation is a discipline. It requires practice, skill, and a solid grounding in the

³⁵ Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 36.

tradition and materials of the past. This is another juxtaposition—the musician spends time “preparing to be spontaneous . . . balancing between constraints and experimentation in public performance.”³⁶ At the same time a musician displays knowledge of tradition, they also are able to model “letting go of the familiar and comfortable in order to welcome new possibilities and opportunities.”³⁷ Jeremy Begbie draws a direct connection between the action of God’s Spirit in the world and the act of musical improvisation:

We are called not only to discover and respect but also to develop. To be an image bearer of the God who himself develops created realities, improvising through his Spirit freely on the given order as he draws things toward their goal, means we will find ourselves bringing about new entities in the world by selecting, re-forming, combining what we are given. We take cocoa pods and transform them into chocolate; we take a blues bass and improvise something never heard before. However small our patch of creativity, we are to enable creation to find fresh, perhaps even richer forms.³⁸

Musical improvisation could be used to demonstrate this theological truth in a variety of ways. First, gifted musicians and worship leaders can practice improvisation as a part of the service. Improvisation is a part of the church’s musical heritage. In the early church, it is believed that the musical *jubilus* (an extension of the *alleluia*, sung before the gospel reading) was improvised.³⁹ Improvisation could occur in a solo voice, or among instrumentalists as the congregation sings a simple melody, as in music from

³⁶ Barrett, *Yes to the Mess*, xi.

³⁷ Barrett, 16.

³⁸ Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2007), 208.

³⁹ Donald P. Hustad, "The Historical Roots of Music in the Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal Movements," *The Hymn* 38, no. 1 (January 1987): 8-9.

the Taizé community. A bonus of modeling improvisation in this way is that mistakes are a crucial part of the experience—as the legendary jazz trumpeter Miles Davis put it, “If you’re not making a mistake, it’s a mistake.”⁴⁰ This attitude goes a long way toward the development of the “holding environment” described above.

A simple form of communal improvisation takes place in the chanting of the psalms. While the psalm tone is prescribed, because the chant adapts to the particular psalm and the flow of human speech, each experience of chanting a psalm will be different. Each group will sing the psalm differently, adjusting rhythms and tempo in response to subtle cues from the rest of the congregation. Regardless of how musical improvisation is used in the service, its place can serve as a powerful demonstration of continual transformation.

The Stranger as Disruptive Challenge

Hospitality to the stranger is a core posture of the Christian life. The liturgy points “toward the outsider, who is not yet included,” in order to demonstrate that “the kingdom of God has no outsiders,”⁴¹ while at the same time reminding us all that “we are the strangers” in need of reconciliation and inclusion.⁴² An attitude of welcome to strangers (and recognition that we ourselves are strangers) is difficult to maintain. It requires a significant amount of risk: “a decentering of our self-centered lives that is most

⁴⁰ Barrett, *Yes to the Mess*, 43.

⁴¹ Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 26.

⁴² Lathrop, 119.

disturbing.”⁴³ Perhaps this is why hospitality is often redefined and shifted out of the liturgy. Churches have “hospitality committees” that make sure visitors have access to coffee and donuts in the narthex, but little to no acknowledgement is actually made during the liturgy that there may be strangers in our midst. One exception is in the African-American church. Seventy-seven percent of African-American ministers report that they ask their church visitors to stand as part of the worship service, in contrast to only seventeen percent of all pastors.⁴⁴ This practice is linked to the historical backdrop of the African-American church as a haven for the marginalized and an agent in the efforts for reunifying fractured families during the Reconstruction era.⁴⁵ In an African-American church following the Civil War, a visitor was not an outsider in need of quiet assimilation, but an agent bearing information that could be critical in reuniting lost family members. The church offered all it could, and received all it could from its visitors—modeling a type of radical hospitality and openness built on hopes of reunion and restoration. It is no coincidence that “worship in the black tradition is celebration of the power to survive and to affirm life . . . such a tradition encourages spontaneity and improvisation.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 59.

⁴⁴ "Greeters and Gifts: How Churches Welcome Guests." LifeWay Research, March 14, 2018. Accessed online on July 25, 2018 at: <https://lifewayresearch.com/2018/03/14/greeters-and-gifts-how-churches-welcome-guests/>.

⁴⁵ Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 158-159.

⁴⁶ William B. McClain, *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 49.

While the practice of being asked to stand, introduce yourself, and give some biographical details would be off-putting to many contemporary “church shoppers,” a liturgical practice that recognizes the importance of the unique stories of each visitor and embodies an eager anticipation of what strangers could offer the gathered body would model a much richer theology than coffee and optional visitor cards to fill out. What might this look like? Expressions of this idea will look different in every context, and will draw on the ritual and cultural tools at hand. In contexts where singling out visitors would be perceived as awkward or threatening, liturgical moments could be developed to reintroduce the *idea* of strangers each week, prompting the people to be aware of the possibility and potential of visitors among them. Alternately, moments could be created for long-term members to share the story of their first visit to the church (or other times they felt like a stranger), exploring experiences of anxiety, vulnerability, hospitality, and inclusion.

The goal is the development of a posture of continual openness to the other, a knowledge of our deep need for what they bring, a recognition that “for the individual to exist, ‘others’ must necessarily be there.”⁴⁷ Such a posture points us to the very nature of the Trinity—the eternal dance of *perichoresis*, in which “each person is indwelling and room-giving at the same time.”⁴⁸ It is in this embrace of the unknown, this openness to challenge, change, and transformation through communion with others that the virtue of love is most fully experienced: “*Love* is another word for this community of mutual

⁴⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Sanctorum Communio” in Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Clifford J. Green, *The Bonhoeffer Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 24.

⁴⁸ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 114.

indwelling. Those who love are not in themselves but in others; those who are loved give others free space to live in them.”⁴⁹ An innovative liturgy will be one that continually reminds us of the creative and transformative potential of people we don’t know yet.

When it comes to worship and liturgy, innovation is too often a pragmatic, rather than a theological, concept. Change is viewed as a necessary evil—a concession to changing cultures or frail human distractibility. This mindset is reinforced if our eschatological hopes include a heaven of stasis. However, if we embrace a dynamic eschatology such as Gregory of Nyssa’s theology of epectasy, in which the ultimate goal is not to freeze but to continually experience new revelations of God’s infinite self, innovation can be redeemed as an ultimate theological good, rather than a penultimate pragmatic one. A liturgy that draws on this will view innovation- the change of practice within a group- as a demonstration of God’s very nature and an anticipation of and participation in humanity’s eternal future. Our boundless potential (or, perhaps more precisely, *God’s* boundless revelatory capacity) can be practiced in our liturgies now. Practices such as the use of individual or group musical improvisation and the recognition and anticipation of strangers among us can pave the way for a transformation into people who love, rather than fear, the fundamental unpredictability of existence.

⁴⁹ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 122.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: EPECTASY AS A THEOLOGY FOR INNOVATION

We live in a world where change is unavoidable and accelerating. Not only that, but our ability to learn about the extent of changes all around the world has increased exponentially. The latest developments in weather, politics, social upheaval, natural disasters, and human violence are available to us in a constant stream, bombarding us on our TVs, radios, computers, telephones, and watches. Of course, this news tends to be sensationalized and fixated on the negative, further reinforcing our primal anxieties. One survey found that “watching, reading, or listening to the news” was listed as a key contributor to stress among those experiencing “a great deal of stress” in the past month.¹ These feelings can easily bleed into underlying assumptions about change in general. The suspicion grows that one is an unsuspecting frog in a kettle that is reaching the boiling point. Change will kill you, and the best hope of survival lies in escaping the tumult of modern life and finding the safety of stasis.

For most of the church’s history, such stasis has been a key part of the eschatological vision. Based in the philosophical presumption of God’s immutability, Christians envisioned an eternity in which humans gain a share in changelessness, forgoing the continuation of change, novelty, or even the experience of existence. As we

¹ NPR, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the Harvard School of Public Health, “The Burden of Stress in America,” July 7, 2014, accessed online on January 26, 2019, https://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/surveys_and_polls/2014/rwjf414295

have seen, both sociological and theological work has demonstrated the importance and impact of future expectations on current practice. It is natural, then, that such a vision of heaven, combined with the general anxiety experienced in a changing environment, would produce a church tradition centered around practices that model, as much as possible, an element of dogged continuity and resistance to change. In this model, Christians can draw hope from a knowledge that, whatever storms are currently being weathered, their future will be perfectly still.

At the same time, many Christians have recognized that changing circumstances require at least some sort of response from the church, if only because God demonstrates a supreme accommodation to the particularities of human culture in the person of Jesus. There are concerns that a church that does not change at all as culture changes around it will lose any ability to communicate the Gospel to the world that God loves. Thus, certain concessions are made (often with great struggle), with the underlying pragmatic assumption that such changes are necessary to the church's continued efficacy. While a legitimate motivation, this does not remove the central anxiety and suspicion that surround change, and it allows such changes to be accepted as a necessary evil, a practical necessity without any inherent theological value (unless the value lies in being like God—willing to *give up* the peace of eternal rest in order to condescend to human weakness—an attitude that views the changes themselves as negative, even if there is a moral virtue in accepting them for a time). In essence, one specified anxiety (the irrelevance and disintegration of the church) trumps the more generalized anxiety about change-as-such. This is not to say that all theologians and missiologists who are advocating for change in the church are intentionally threatening congregations with

obsolescence if they don't get with the program. Far from it, the teaching that the incarnation represents God's willingness to engage with the particulars of human culture is sound, as is its intention as an invitation to Christians to join in with God's ongoing work. Unfortunately, however, it is easy for many in the church to hear this well-intentioned invitation as a threat or a condemnation—"change or die," an incredibly difficult message to process when "change and die" is so fundamentally ingrained.

Jesus teaches that a lack of anxiety is to be one of the markers of his followers. In the Sermon on the Mount, he exhorts listeners not to worry five times in ten verses (Matthew 6:25-34). While his teaching is not naïve—"do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own" (v. 34) certainly allows that change can cause problems- Jesus' answer is not to allow anxiety to be the main driver in his disciples' response to changing circumstances. Instead of pining for an escape from the changing world, Jesus' people are to seek the kingdom of God in the midst of the steady march of time, among "the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven" (v. 30).

A theology that sees the inherent potential of change, not just for the removal of things we don't like but for continual surprise and joy, will be able to embrace a changing world (and a changing church) as one ripe with possibility. Gregory of Nyssa's conception of epectasy is just such a theology. It envisions a humanity that is fundamentally created for change, in order to experience the inexhaustible "depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God" (Romans 11:33). A church with this vision in mind will be wholly open to God's gentle working of change within the community—the experience of holy innovation. A church with this vision will be non-anxiously open to

an uncertain future, confident that, with the steward in Cana, it will be able to continually proclaim, “you have kept the good wine until now” (John 2:10).

This journey is not one of progress in the Western sense, nor is it an individualistic journey of self-enlightenment. Instead, epectasy is a theology of emergence—expecting the unpredictable rather than typical standards of “progress.” It is communal—grounded in the life of the Trinity. It is holistic, refusing to separate the body, mind, and soul either in the present or in eternity. While life in the eschaton will be different in some way from the present, epectasy also draws on its vision of the future as a call for action in the present—manifested as an openness to continual God-led change. G. Stanley Hall writes that people “grow old because they stop playing, and not conversely, for play is, at bottom, growth, and at the top of the intellectual scale it is the eternal type of research from sheer love of truth.”² Practices of innovation are a form of play, an exploration of new possibilities, “the eternal type of research,” and can be used without fear or reluctance, as one way in which the Spirit of God continues to bring fresh blessings to the church.

For Gregory of Nyssa, God is the ultimate innovator. While this phrasing may be anachronistic, in Nyssa’s theology of epectasy we find a God who implements infinite change and development in the community of faith. There is no end to transformation, because there is no end to God’s goodness. If the church is truly to serve as a “sign and foretaste,” of this eternal reality, then it must embrace holy innovation- God driven communal change- not as a pragmatic good but as a foundational, infinite value. An

² G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, vol. 1 (New York: Appleton, 1904), 235.

acceptance of epectasy can enable the church to live bravely, in joyful optimism, not avoiding change but actively seeking out and embracing continual, Spirit-led transformation. This will manifest in communal practices that encourage experimentation and openness to surprise, practices like improvisation and hospitality. Lamin Sanneh writes: “Christianity should not anywhere be about the refusal to change the old; it should be about the willingness to embrace the new.”³ Gregory of Nyssa’s theology of epectasy allows the church to unreservedly do just that—embracing the new as God continually surprises us.

C.S. Lewis’ Narnia series concludes with a stirring description of the Christian life and hope, perfectly encapsulating the allure of and promise of epectasy:

The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.⁴

With such a vision held firmly in mind, the church cannot help but become a place from which innovation springs, a place where change is celebrated and God’s mercies are truly “new every morning” (Lamentations 3:23), now and forever.

³ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2003), 76.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Collier Books, 1970), 183-184.

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