

## **THE LIMITS OF HOPE AND THE LOGIC OF LOVE: ON THE BASIS OF CHRISTIAN SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

Stephen N. Williams

It has long been said that social action is the offspring of love but by now we are also familiar with the claim of hope to conjoint parental rights and responsibilities. To propose that hope has determinate limits with regard to social action looks like playing Canute with the contemporary theological tide. The story is often told of how scholarship appeared to secure for eschatology its place in the New Testament a few decades ago at the cost of uprooting it from any stable home in dogmatic theology. But its odyssey ended with the discovery of a congenial partner, viz., social action and since the 1960s we have witnessed a brood of theologies proficially spawned, mandating socially transforming activity partly or largely on the basis of eschatological hope. That is the background to this lecture whose focus, none the less, is biblical rather than dogmatic. The following is a proposal that we distinguish between love and hope in relation to social responsibility and action without suggesting a schism designed to spice up in unsanctified fashion the theological task.

Reference to biblical, as opposed to dogmatic theology, requires comment. All the distinction states is that we are asking about biblical perspectives and not taking on the dogmatic task of asking about the status of such perspectives in relation to the contemporary theological endeavour. But 'biblical perspectives' also requires comment. The deliberate design of taking broad biblical themes in the compass of a single lecture obviously risks first, imposing artificial unity on the material and secondly, neglecting exegesis. This warning is well taken and, I hope, heeded. If distinctions are not explicitly made and exegesis is not explicitly offered I hope it will at least be clear that care has been taken to propound a thesis that is fully alert to the relevant range of questions. Having said that, it is as well to let the kind of argument presented show forth its contours in the actual presentation, or

the qui s'excuse s'accuse syndrome which hovers over introductory remarks will be in too much evidence.

In his *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, Stephen Mott provides us with a comprehensive and focussed discussion of principles of biblical theology of social action.<sup>1</sup> We begin by being parasitic on this account particularly as it embodies the kind of plausible and solid conclusions that will strike many as evidently correct. While he adopts as an overall perspective the cosmic conflict with evil, Mott finds the direct biblical mandate for social action rather 'in the models associated with God's activity in the world than the theology of the cosmos' (19). Four themes emerge. First there is grace, grounding all Christian ethics, its bearing on social responsibility clarified as it shades into the second theme of love. Though the author speaks of the third theme, justice, as providing 'the most direct and far-reaching biblical authorization for social action' (77), justice is a form of love. The relations of love to justice are variously described. Justice may complete the work of love or be its instrument; carry out its implications or be transcended by it. Justice is the social incarnation of love (hence we may call it a 'form' of it). All this is argued exegetically. Supremely, when we read the New Testament love commandment in the light of the Old Testament motif of social justice, we have the firmest of biblical grounds for a theology of social involvement.

Eschatology is the fourth theme. The broad idea is that 'the Reign of God is a central biblical concept which incorporates the imperative for social responsibility into God's goals for history' (82). Keeping again the Old Testament background in view Mott emphasizes both realized and future eschatologies. Now, with Jesus, the divine reign makes its incursion into the world, including its sociality; then, in future, God will triumph on the cosmic scale. History presses on this goal. The power within and the promise before history thus constitute an imperative for socially transforming activity. We shall not follow Mott's development of this line. Rather, we focus on a problematic feature in his discussion. This has to do with the relation of the grand totalities of consummated his-

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<sup>1</sup> OUP 1982.

tory to the several particulars of social endeavour. The following phrases and claims quoted from his work are chosen not just to cite his words but because they ring familiar and seem conceptually innocuous.

Speaking eschatologically, 'all will join in the song of Revelation (90; cf. Rev. 11:17); 'Christ's work affects all of history' (95); 'the ultimate purpose in history is the total sovereignty of God over all things' (101); 'in the end all the created world—people, supernatural powers, natural forces and institutions—will be conformed to the will of God' (101). The scene is cosmic and universal. So what of the relation of the eschatological future to present activity? Not only does hope embody values which we must pursue but 'the demand of God upon us now is intensified by anticipation of the future' (91); our small victories 'speak of the approaching outcome', our historical struggles are 'not irrelevant to the coming of God's full reign' (96); 'the effort to build a temporal city is relevant to the divine work of redemption' (103). But there is a deeper strand. Mott grants that 'God is not asking us to build eternal structures but to accept our responsibility for God's creation' (91) but he also speaks of God as 'creating and building up His reign' (106), of the last events as being under way and of the conquest of evil as being 'in process' (95). However, let us select the following assertion as a springboard for discussion: God's purpose in the present age is 'to narrow the gap until Christ not only reigns but assumes complete control of the governments of the world' (90).

'Narrowing the gap' is a picture and Wittgenstein graphically illustrates how we can be misled by pictures in our thinking.<sup>2</sup> Of course the question of the relation of pictorial representation to conceptual thought is an old one. In the field of New Testament studies, modern discussion got its distinctive stimulus from the work of D.F. Strauss, its background including Hegel's attempt to translate religious images into philosophical concepts. In our century it is above all Amos Wilder who put together the issues of eschatology and social ethics, picture and concept in New Testament scholarship and his

<sup>2</sup> Norman Malcolm, *Ludwing Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (OUP 1958) 53f.

concerns are still alive. There is a cluster of issues involved here but we must stick to one question: what is being conceived of when we hear talk of 'narrowing the gap'? The biblical narrative may indeed encourage us to picture history as moving forward to its destiny, a grand totality heading for eschatological consummation. Now if that is the narrowing of the gap, the gap is chronological. But there is another gap: the qualitative one. On a theory of progress, the gap is narrowing too. But Mott is not committed to that theory.<sup>3</sup> What, then, does he take to be a biblical perspective on qualitative improvement in history? Let us assume there are criteria for improvement. Presumably Mott allows that deterioration as well as improvement marks history before the eschaton. So what is meant by 'narrowing the gap'? Is it just a chronological truism? Or, if it is a qualitative concept, does the gap widen in some ways and narrow in others? Or is there a distinction between God's purposes and God's accomplishments? We are not told.

Possibly it is the failure to reflect on the relation of pictures to concepts in adumbrating a biblical theology that lies behind Mott's conviction that Rauschenbusch clinched the argument for the pursuit of social righteousness.<sup>4</sup> According to Rauschenbusch the argument that we postpone striving for social righteousness on the ground that we cannot achieve it till the eschaton is doomed for the simple reason that such an argument should prevent us from pursuing personal holiness as well. But the argument fails to note the distinction in the way present and future are related in the respective cases. Those who do not grow in holiness, who do not seek to narrow the gap between what they are and what they will be, risk forfeiting the destiny for which they hope, for spiritual progress in this life is in some measure a ground for entitlement to hope for perfection in the next. Even those who argue for universalism on a biblical basis want to affirm some version of that claim. However, God's promise of a new heaven and new earth is not related in the same way to cosmic progress; it stands for the world even if the world degenerates till the eschaton. Mott

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<sup>3</sup> Though see an unexplained phrase in *The Use of the Bible in Social Ethics* 11 in *Transformation* 1.3 (1984) 21: 'a tendency toward change'.

<sup>4</sup> *Biblical Ethics* 91.

certainly along with the majority of biblical scholars, seems to hold that the realization of the eschaton is not contingent on overall progress. So the cases are not parallel.

The question is, then: what does the biblical sense of a grand totality really contribute to the social imperative? Can what God 'creates', 'builds' in history be torn down in history? Can states of affairs which seem to anticipate the eschaton mutate into states qualitatively at odds with the eschatological prospect? If deterioration is possible, how is the relation between eschatological fulfilment and temporal accomplishment to be described? No attempts will be made here to answer all questions but they are generated by any who formulate as does Mott a basis in biblical eschatology for social responsibility.

It is unquestionably true that New Testament materials (on which we concentrate) present us with scenes of the cosmic or universal scope of redemption, even if the propriety of phrases sometimes used (like 'redemption of all history' or 'redemption of institutions') are not to be taken for granted where biblical linguistic usage is concerned. Romans 8, the opening chapter of Ephesians and of Colossians, Revelation 21 or notions like *apokastasis* and *palingenesia* are standardly cited in this connection. Yet what kind of totality or comprehensiveness is involved in such passages or concepts? The debate over universalism, still occasionally rumbling on in New Testament studies, helps us here. According to non-universalists, eschatological totalities are not sum totalities: any talk of 'all humankind' is not talk of all humans where inclusion in salvation is under consideration. A grand totality, in such an analysis, is not every particular.

On any reading of the passage cited, to take eschatological wholeness as a totality of particulars is futile. Romans 1:8-18ff. furnishes us with an example. There is a strong case for reading here as a reference to non-human creation.<sup>5</sup> According to a 'strong' reading of this passage we should include within the sphere of redemption here everything not

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<sup>5</sup> Even Käsemann so interprets it; see *Commentary on Romans* (ET, SCM 1980) *ad loc.*

obviously or explicitly excluded.<sup>6</sup> Even here, however, a sum total is scarcely in mind. For that would include all animals and all trees. Such an argument applies *a fortiori* to those who interpret Revelation 21:24-6 as implying that all that is best in human culture will be preserved in the eschatological kingdom. It applies *a fortiori* just because there is far less exegetical consensus for such an interpretation than there is for taking *ktisis* to refer to non-human creation, and that is because the argument concerning *ktisis* is basically linguistic (though context and genre are relevant) while the argument concerning the passage from Revelation is more broadly hermeneutical. However, even granting this possible interpretation of the entry of the kings, the scope of this passage in relation to the particulars that constitute human culture can obviously only be stated in the most general possible way. It is true that interpreters of passages such as the above are well aware of the difficulty of trying to net biblical talk of the transformed eschatological order in empirically-based concepts. It is true that such passages do not gain their force from their attempted application to all the particulars of history. Nevertheless our line of inquiry is neither banal nor inconsequential. What is its significance?

The significance is that it posts a warning about our use of the concept 'hope' when we relate eschatological hope to social responsibility. When a non-universalist speaks of 'hope for all humanity' he does not mean 'hope for all humans' in the sense that eschatological promises of salvation apply to all particular individuals. Even universalists will not mean by 'hope for history' or for 'all creation' or for 'the whole world' promises for all particulars. In an important sense, then, 'hope' does not govern our relationship to all particulars. Of course, the word does not bear a single standard meaning in the Greek New Testament. But it is sufficient for our purposes to pick out a use of it typical of Pauline and Petrine literature and of the letter to the Hebrews where it is explicitly or implicitly correlated to divine promises.<sup>7</sup> Of course one may describe Christian existence in the New Testament as eschatological existence and even argue that future hope in vast tracts of its

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids 1967) *ad loc.*

<sup>7</sup> Of course can be the substantive object, not just the subjective attitude.

literature governs our attitude to all life, including, therefore, every particular person, event and activity. But that is not the same as hope (in the sense under consideration) on behalf of all particulars. Particular temporal events may occasionally be governed by divine promise in Scripture. But there is a distinction between eschatological promises and what constitute from the human point of view a seething mass of possibilities in the minutiae of human life.

The statement of all this has twofold significance in the present context. First, in contemporary biblical and dogmatic theology the vocabulary of hope in relation to social action is marshalled under the banner of the eschaton without consistently distinguishing between the promised and the temporally particular. Even when a point is technically correct, 'hope' slithers around uncomfortably. To cite one exegete notably attentive to language:

These days we have reduced the blazing certainty that the New Testament calls hope to a cautious optimism that fits these uncertain times. This is an unfortunate situation, because hope is vital. Has any truly effective social or religious movement—one that really gripped people—failed to inspire hope in its followers?<sup>8</sup>

But what is the 'hope' of a social or religious movement hope for? If it is a blazing certainty of success in the venture it is unwarranted without special divine revelation. Leon Morris' subsequent remarks on slaves, outcasts and women reveal that the point he makes is consistent and true enough, but what he leaves unclear is the relation between the hope embodied in a social or religious movement and hope for that movement.

Secondly, the preceding discussion opens the way for formulating a thesis about social action. Mott gave pride of place to love (and justice), not eschatology. With regard to hope we pressed the question of the relation of the eschatological whole to the temporal particular. Love seems to govern the particular in a way different from that of hope. A non-universalist does not hope for all in the sense of 'hope' which interests us. But it is seldom denied that the New Testament mandates love for all. Love, in this case, is neither coterminous

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<sup>8</sup> Leon Morris, *Testament of Love* (Eerdmans 1981) 258.

with nor dependent on hope. Of course the English preposition 'for' conceals a distinction which classical and other languages will make in their term: love 'for' is roughly love 'towards' whereas hope 'for' has a less secure English periphrasis, but certainly 'towards' is not apt. This, however, does not affect the present point. The point is the distinction between love and hope in relation to particulars. If we establish it in relation to people we have got a purchase on the argument.

Turning to *agapē* rather than to hope it may seem tedious to re-cover ground in an argument for social action grounded in love. Yet a distinctive, if not original, presentation is in order. The strategy is to look at the prima facie case and tackle five objections to it. Space prevents us from essaying more than a minimal response to the objections, but the aim is adequate cogency not maximal rigour. The love which most naturally comes to mind in connection with the New Testament as far as social action is concerned is, of course, love for neighbour. The command is found six times: in the three Synoptic accounts (Mt. 22:39; Mk. 12:31; Lk. 10:27), twice in Paul's epistles (Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14) and in James 2:8. Nothing in the following argument depends on claiming that the scope of 'neighbour' is intentionally or implicitly the same in all these cases. Nor is there any relevant point at issue if we take the canonical text without critical reconstruction as the basis of the following remarks. This consideration is of immediate relevance because the canonical *locus classicus* for the exposition of the commandment to love neighbour is the so-called parable of the Good Samaritan. At first the neighbour in the parable is apparently identified by and even defined in terms of need. But, of course, in the account Jesus eventually identified the self, not the other, with 'neighbour'. This has its own potential in relation to social action if the aim is to weave together canonical strands. The implication of identifying the self, or active self, with the 'neighbour' seems to be this: the self is not essentially an individual contingently related to the other, but essentially person-in-relationship. That itself states a powerful principle of indiscrimination in relation to others, the relation from my side being determined by my identity as neighbour. This invites reflection on the nature of God of whom neither *elpis* nor *pistis* can usefully be predicated on the basis

of New Testament linguistic or conceptual usage, but who is *agapē* according to John. And if we have gone so far as to fuse Johannine with Lucan concerns and Pauline concepts we could then connect the fundamentally relational character of the self with the fundamentally relational character of deity who is love precisely in His inner-divine relationship, according to a trinitarian reading of the canon.

But whatever the possibilities of such a broad scheme, a less theologically indulgent reading of Luke will suffice to make the present point. To be a neighbour or to love another is to meet the need of the needy according to the need when the needy is met. A familiar way of stating social implications runs like this. Improving travel safety and communications, securing protection and legal sanction against felons, providing adequate health care all seem to be not only legitimate but even mandatory extensions if possible of the Good Samaritan's programme. If it is the oppressive structure that causes another's misery then love for neighbour is exercised in the deliberate attempt to change structures. It is this kind of scenario we have in mind when using terms like 'social concern', 'social action' or 'social responsibility'.

Now this move from the parable to the conclusion drawn can be described in more than one way. Firstly, it might be argued that it is a matter of intuitive or imaginative application: the parable is the paradigm for situations which we recognize when they arise and the appropriate form of activity is readily grasped. That fits in with the way in which, for example, Dodd and Jeremias stressed the significance of parable as opposed to systematic exposition, but it also is consistent with the view taken in Chilton and McDonald's recent work whose concerns are especially germane to the theme of this essay.<sup>9</sup> But secondly, it might be urged that if the move from parable to application be warranted, clear inference is required. It may be held that features of the New Testament materials block such an inference so that to speak of the above type of social action as biblically warranted is wrong. So we examine five counter-arguments.

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<sup>9</sup> B. Chilton, J.I.H. McDonald, *Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom* (SPCK, 1987), though this work has its own angle.

1. The New Testament never mandates a neighbour-love which entails attempts to transform structures. However you describe the relation of Old to New Testaments, its silence prohibits the kind of move earlier made.

Reference to the Old Testament is important here because by 'biblical' perspective I effectively mean 'New Testament' in this essay. That, however, will not distort the argument. As it stands, the above objection is insufficient. For what is proposed is that the biblical principle of neighbour-love permits and even mandates social action under amenable circumstances. The issue turns on the scope of the principle not the specificity of biblical materials. As an independent objection, then, this does not stand.

2. The New Testament on the whole proposes an attitude to established authority that is one of submission, which, when we consider its ramifications, discourages attempted transformation of the social order.

This point, indeed, can be alternatively formulated but the response to it should cover the alternatives. This objection, at best, cannot of itself do more than address the question of limits and methods of social action. In both Old and New Testaments, established authority is itself, within or without the covenant community, responsible for elements of social justice. There are divine criteria for responsible exercise of authority which entail the self-reformation of government when these are not met. The question, then, is not whether social structures may or should be transformed; it is about the relation of subject to authority in relation to such transformation. In passing, it is worth noting that even where one seems to get least encouragement for socially reforming activity, for example, 1 Peter, it is arguable that there is more to it than meets the twentieth-century eye.<sup>10</sup> But it suffices to note for the moment that, again, the objection is insufficient though of course it does indicate the issue at the cutting edge of much socio-political activity.

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<sup>10</sup> See Bruce Winter, 'The Public Honouring of Christian Benefactors', *JSNT* 34 (1988) 87-103 and 'Seek the Welfare of the City: Social Ethics according to 1 Peter', *Themelios* 13.3 (1988).

3. The primary responsibility of the Christian church is evangelism, not social action.

Again, significant reformulations and variations on this point are forthcoming. And again, an issue which is raised here, viz., the question of priorities and relations between evangelism and social action, cannot be addressed. The general difficulty with this objection or similar ones is that it does not reflect adequately on the point of evangelism. The epistle to the Romans is framed by the phrase 'obedience of faith' (1:4; 16:26) and it would suit my argument here to take this as a subjective genitive but the evidence is just not compelling enough. So instead let us just note what the Great Commission (Matthean) implies about the obedience of discipleship. Here discipleship is an aim of evangelism. One must then ask what lies at the heart of discipleship? We are presumably meant to glean this from Matthew's own Gospel. And love of neighbour is a strong candidate in this connection, allied, of course, to the love of God. If discipleship is a goal of evangelism and neighbour love is crucial in discipleship and social action is taken to be a form of neighbour-love then evangelism and social action cannot be rivals at heart. Those who restrict the purpose of evangelism to getting others to heaven or to making others fishers of men need to integrate the robust requirement that we love our neighbour into that scheme without restricting the scope of love. This involves for one thing accepting that discipleship here on earth is attentive to material elements of life. It involves for another distancing the church from that prestigious Academy which elects Fellows whose sole aim is the election of other Fellows (though conscientious indulgence in statutory fraternal convivialities is also a preferred norm of conduct). So again, while the objection raises an issue which must be faced in a more comprehensive context, it is insufficient as it stands.

4. The social dimension of *agapē* in the early Christian communities was expressed in the form of love for brethren; the church, not the world, is the focus of the conscious social application of *agapē*.

We need not rehearse here the appeal that can readily be made to Johannine and Pauline literature. At root the ques-

tion is: is any limitation of *agapē* in that literature a principled limitation in relation to society or is it a circumstantial limitation? The attempt to formulate a single principle to meet this objection adequately within our limits of space is formidable. Serious pursuit of this objection requires an appraisal of Käsemann's work (he reads Johannine literature as evidence of a relatively ingrown love) and recently the work of those like Beker and Rowland who observe a tension between some Pauline principles, pregnant with social radicalism, and Pauline social conservatism, disappointingly expressed in some other theological statements of principle.<sup>11</sup> Yet reflection on the concept of *agapē* in both John and Paul tends to turn aside the objection.

The point is this: clearly in John and implicitly, I think, in Paul, love is a principle of conduct only because it is a principle of identity.<sup>12</sup> This might be put another way but its substance is as follows. In Johannine literature the love which is meant to take root in the Christian life is not just a response to God and not just the human fruit of union with the Father through the Son. It is participation in the divine *agapē* so that the perichoretic relations of Father and Son described in John 17 are extended to believers. Of course this needs careful description. But on any interpretation—and one thinks not only of John 17 but of the extraordinary language of 1 John 4:12—love is a rule of conduct only as it constitutes anew the very spiritual life of believers, the identity of those reborn from above. A parallel point is harder to establish in the case of Paul partly because of the relative placing of *pistis* and *agapē*. Yet in the Galatian correspondence, the life of faith is most profoundly described as the life of the indwelling Christ (2:17-20) and the operation of faith, and hence of the indwelling Christ through the Spirit, is expressly pre-eminently love (5:6). Still, it is with reference to the letter to the Ephesians, whatever we may decide on authorship, that our point is best secured. It describes in unrivalled terms the eschatological foundation of doxology, the eschatology here normally being dubbed 'realized'. The

<sup>11</sup> See J.C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (ET, T&T Clark 1980); this way of putting it draws rather on C. Rowland, *Christian Origins* (SPCK 1985) 4.4.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology* III (University of Chicago 1963) 290.

believer's *agapē* to which the epistle refers is the sheer overflow of communion with Jesus Christ. Now a phenomenological reflection that does justice to this testimony would have to conclude that *agapē* in principle cannot possibly be restricted, because it marks one's identity. Love cannot be restricted to the church more than what one is one can be only in relation to the church and not to the world. It is certainly in order to argue, as many do, that the proper exegesis of Pauline and Johannine texts shows that love is not restrictive in the way some propose. But without prejudice to the results of such exegesis, it must be granted that any universalism of love is propounded in a context where intra-communal love is to the fore. The point is adequately secured if it is granted that principles of conduct and principles of identity are related in the proposed way. It follows that if social action is described as a way of applying *agapē* to those outside the church, then it is circumstance and not principle that accounts for such restriction as we find in John and Paul. At least, in the case of Paul, this obtains if we accept that the love described in Ephesians really does express a latency in the *agapē* of which he writes elsewhere.<sup>13</sup>

5. The final objection is listed as final for two closely related reasons. First, it touches on something behind all the objections we have surveyed so far, namely that of the background *Weltanschauung* in the New Testament documents for the life and work of love. Secondly, it explicitly leads us back to the relation of eschatology to love. The objection is this: if we interpret love of neighbour in the proposed way, relating it to social action, it collides with a vital strand of New Testament eschatology. It collides with premillennial belief. Such an eschatology, it may be urged, is pessimistic about the world, regarding it as bound to evil and deterioration from which there is salvation only in the Church faithful to Jesus until in

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<sup>13</sup> Love includes care for bodily welfare as both Paul and John (at least in I John) make clear. With reference to circumstantial restrictions on love, the 'circumstances' in mind are those of first century Christianity in its social and political context as a community of love. Of course, I have not sought to indicate the positive aspect of the community ethic of early Christianity where it might be emphasized that the logical first place for the social expression of love is on principle, and not just circumstantially, the Christian community.

his advent he destroys the evil and establishes the good. Hence, the argument goes, any intentionally structure-transforming love is misguided, confusing temporal endeavour with eschatological guarantee.

Of course, premillennial eschatology is not to be regarded as a monolith and even common doctrinal tenets may permit different consequences according to the different tenants of that position. One rebuttal is obviously denial of the premise, that is denial that premillennialism is a proper interpretation of any strand of New Testament material. But supposing the interpretation were granted, it could then be argued that the prospect of world-decline is not entailed in adoption of the premillennialist view of Christ's advent. But supposing it were granted that there is evidence in the New Testament of belief in such decline, it would not follow from this that nothing should be attempted and that nothing could succeed socially. Here we must invoke the earlier discussion of particulars. Just as surely as the future cosmic whole is not the sum of particulars, so there is no exegetical basis for interpreting any 'world-declining' strands in the New Testament in terms of all particulars. Even with wars and rumours of wars it does not follow that no wars will cease this side of the eschaton or that peacemaking is futile. Sure enough, as God may promise the success of temporally particular endeavours so he may foretell the doom of temporally particular endeavours. But it remains the case that even were the 'world-declining' position accepted, it would not rob love of its responsibility or ability to secure something rather than nothing. One should not despair of all particulars and so cannot on any eschatological position refuse love's labours.<sup>14</sup>

The response to this objection may appear to compound two difficulties at least in the thesis advanced so far. Firstly, it looks as if foundations for social responsibility are being laid with an express intention of avoiding eschatology. Love is

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<sup>14</sup> Whilst it does not affect our treatment, it should be noted that no one denies the historically socially effective activity of premillennialists though it may be claimed that eschatology and action do not make happy logical bedfellows in such cases: C. Sugden, V. Samuel (edd.), *The Church in Response to Human Need* (Regnum 1987) 152.

being detached from eschatology by the ploy of saying that it is consistent with many interpretations. And that is an exercise in dogmatic rather than in biblical theology. Secondly, it looks as if we purchase the mandate for social action at the price of an extremely vague and even shifting idea of what social action embraces: it seems to be a general application of the parable of the Good Samaritan with a nod in the direction of structural transformation. So what is at stake in contemporary discussion of social responsibility never comes to light. If these two points are taken in order it will bring into sharper focus the contours of the present thesis.

On the first point, it is undeniable that eschatological perspectives in the New Testament qualify its description of love, though the extent of this is debatable.<sup>15</sup> Ogletree's appeal that we take to heart the eschatological horizon of biblical moral understanding (embracing love) is compatible with everything said so far.<sup>16</sup> Nothing as ambitious as the aim to relate eschatology to ethics is being attempted here. That would raise a host of questions on ethics in relation to expectation of the Parousia; the ethics of rewards and punishments; ethics and realized eschatology, etc. The declared interest in the relation of social activity to the future cosmic, overall perspective is just the first of many limitations in the argument. Certainly such a perspective is needed to describe love properly. All love's operations are framed by what God will accomplish, fulfil and realize in or for human history. Love can be sustained, enriched and informed by hope. To it may be promised the revelation of the intelligibility of its work in the eschaton. The relation of love and hope can be illuminated by the introduction of other concepts, like *upomonē*. These things and their importance is not denied. But the whole point of refusing to adjudicate issues of biblical eschatology is to establish the logic of love, viz., that it mandates social action even if hope is limited. Keeping eschatology open is a way of securing this principle.

<sup>15</sup> See B. Gerhardsson, *The Ethos of the Bible* (Darton, Longman & Todd 1980), esp. 33f.

<sup>16</sup> *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (Fortress 1983).

The second point touches on the important matter of definition and clarification. 'Social action', for example, is often used rather generally if not vaguely in relevant literature, just as a multitude of conditions are covered by such a phrase as 'the poor and the oppressed'. Let us return to the Good Samaritan. The familiar suggestion was adopted that the logic of his concern for the individual entails an attack on social structures where they, rather than physical robbery, create hardship.<sup>17</sup> But equally the parable shows that any concern for structures is at heart concern for the individual whom they oppress, however many there are and however they are joined in community or society. This is a point too easily forgotten both when the concept of 'society' gets the spotlight and when suffering is treated arithmetically, as though there is a quantum of suffering that can be weighed in terms of number of sufferers.<sup>18</sup> The Good Samaritan, in reaching out for one, intentionally reaches out for all, for need and neighbourliness know no bounds. At the same time, in seeking structural transformation if it can help the needy, the Samaritan just implements the most effective way of meeting the individual in his or her need. 'Social action', then, principally refers to that activity which is directed to the alleviation of suffering and injustice where they find social expression, including action in relation to social structures. The point is not to map out spheres of action. The point is to identify generally but concretely the fact of human need and suffering and to argue that a relevant distinction between hope and love brings to light the grounds for responsibility and action.

If, now, a world-transforming project is really the quest to love the suffering individual, in line with the Good Samaritan parable, the reason why particular eschatologies should not be overly obtrusive comes to light. If world-transforming desire is not a belief that society will improve but

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<sup>17</sup> It might be held that this is just the point: we ought to change people and not structures. But again, while we may debate the relation of evil in people to evil embedded in structures, there is no need to deny our responsibility for directly addressing the latter.

<sup>18</sup> That is, suffering cannot be quantified as if ten people injured amounts to ten times the suffering of one person injured. Ten times more for whom?

just a desire, for example, to feed those without bread, it is hard to see how the detail of eschatology should be allowed to thwart or enhance activity too much at this level. The same may be said in relation to the quest for justice in law. That boils down to the quest for just remand conditions, just processes of trial etc. To speak of such things as these being eschatologically transformed or perfected is, of course, unfortunate and inappropriate, if a moment's caricature be permitted! But to speak, on the other hand, as though a pessimistic *Weltanschauung* does away with any desire to achieve such things, or any attempts to do so, is worse than inappropriate. These are precisely the kinds of particulars that need attention within any *Weltanschauung*. And surely these are precisely the kinds of particulars mandated by a biblical principle, that of neighbour-love. It is the very particularity in the biblical injunction to love coupled with reflection on the effective activity of love that impels us to assign to love a kind of independence of eschatology. Three qualifications may be introduced here. First, it is true that social action on behalf of the hungry or unjustly treated may be urged on grounds other than those mentioned, and that action in different social areas may be grounded in varied theological arguments. Secondly, it is true that there are areas where one's precise eschatological position tends to impinge on social action more than it does in others. An example is political liberation, where arguments on the concept of national self-determination go on. Thirdly, I do not deny that different ways of interpreting and applying biblical eschatology affects our social attitudes. My proposal is that we minimize the impact of particular eschatologies, particularly premillennial ones, by arguing for world-transforming *agapē* within its very framework.

A further point, however, should be pressed. 'Social action' is often taken to include action on behalf of non-human creation in its own right. That involves animals and environment. What has been said so far seems to cut this out, because we have talked about neighbours. Animals constitute an interesting and important case in this connection but they cannot be regarded as 'neighbour' from the biblical point of

view, at least as the idea of 'neighbour' is taken up in the New Testament use of Leviticus.<sup>19</sup> While it is not my brief to expound comprehensively the biblical bases for social responsibility, nor to do so in relation to the non-human world, it is worth remarking that if we respect the location of the precept 'love your neighbour' in the Synoptic tradition, we arrive at a ground of responsibility for non-human creation. For one sure sign of the limitation of our project is the detachment of talk about love of neighbour from talk of love of God. Love of God certainly entails care for what God cares for and that takes in the question of the non-human. Indeed, I should wish to argue that what has been said about love and hope, as regards the commitment of the one and the limitation of the other, applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the non-human creation.

However, it is another feature of the injunction to love God that will detain us here as we come to a conclusion. Reflection on it suggests a further reason for placing love in relation to eschatology in the way proposed, though here an outline rather than demonstration must suffice. With talk of love of God we are brought back, as in the case of neighbour-love, to the Old Testament. All New Testament references to the two commandments are presented in relation to law or commandment.<sup>20</sup> In Romans and Galatians, the dispensational sense of God's activity in the world is more marked than anywhere else in Pauline literature. Hence the effect of his introduction of neighbour-love in the latter part of both letters is to tempt us to suppose that love stands in relation to eschatology as the stable does to the shifting. Given an argument such as Zimmerli's, that the 'hope' of deuteronomic history is 'perhaps' and not promise, and given the plethora of strands in Old and New Testament eschatologies,<sup>21</sup> the temptation is rather strong. But one must hold back. For one thing, the bold will detect in the initial promise to Abraham after the disaster of Babel the plan for the course of all biblical eschatology in

<sup>19</sup> Though see the comments of C. Westermann on our humanity and dominion over animals, *Genesis 1-11* (ET, SPCK 1984) 159. But of course he does not call the animals neighbours.

<sup>20</sup> I use both words because actually Mark uses *entolē* but not *nomos*, *loc.cit.*

<sup>21</sup> See D. A. Hubbard, 'Hope in the Old testament', *TynB* 34 (1983) 40.

nuclear form.<sup>22</sup> For another, it can be said that the New Testament universalizes an intentionally restrictive concept of 'neighbour' in the Old Testament. So we resist the attempt to plot a stable love command in relation to a shifting eschatology.

But of course Paul does not speak in this connection of love for God. That command does look stable. No increase or diminution in its scope seems possible. New Testament christology does not suggest it. It is precisely because of its majestic immutability that it is so impressive to find the commands to love God and neighbour linked in the New Testament, however the connection be described.<sup>23</sup> In his classic *Agape and Eros*, Anders Nygren speaks of the 'spontaneous' and 'unmotivated' character of divine love towards us, spring of our grateful imitation in relation to our neighbour. It is not surprising that Nygren, like others, dwelt on the words of Matthew 5:45: 'He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.' The context is the command to love our enemies. Divine provision for life in this world is thus not contingent on the eschatological destiny of those for whom God provides. Love for this God arises in response to his infinite love manifested, it is true, in the election of a people, but manifested too in an activity that is loving, whether temporal projects rise or fall, irrespective of the eschatological destiny of the individual.<sup>24</sup>

Reflection on that love alerts us to a peril in the quest for motives of action other than those of love for God and neighbour. The way that quest is conducted often threatens to take the heart out of social action. Refraining from it is far more a crisis in the heart of love than a failure to get eschatology right in the head. The insistence of Beker, for example, that only if social activity can anticipate eschatological transformation is it really meaningful is surely

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<sup>22</sup> Just in its implicit principle; see e.g. W.J. Dumbrell, *The end of the Beginning* (Lancer Books 1985) 130f.

<sup>23</sup> It is not suggested that Jesus first forged the link; indeed, it is explicitly the lawyer who does so in the Lucan account.

<sup>24</sup> This may be said in a way sufficiently general for our purposes without commitment to a particular interpretation of election or atonement.

torpedoed by the rebellious conclusion that to do unto others what we should have them do unto us is the law and the prophets.<sup>25</sup>

Love of God is rich in passion, desire for the glory of God and desire to do the will of God. What God desires for the world and will accomplish for it is set forth in the description of the eschaton. By its vision it kindles in those who love God the unquenchable desire that, as far as may be, God's will be done now on earth as it will be in the new earth and heaven. Christian hope, von Balthasar wrote, 'vibrates with the thought that the earth should reply to heaven in the way that heaven has addressed the earth'.<sup>26</sup> Calculation and appraisal in terms of the eschaton may have its role in relation to social action but it is totally unsafe to let it play its role until the principle of love for God and neighbour has taken proper root in the heart. Bonhoeffer with force in this *Ethics* shows how what he calls the 'penultimate' things though they are not the things of 'justification' as such, must be wholeheartedly undertaken in loving and hopeful preparation for the advent of Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup> Given desire and given promise love does indeed generate hope—the kind of hope that hopes all things<sup>28</sup>—the kind of hope that governs all particulars, though there is no promise and it is not itself that which is conformed to promise. But it is not just wishful thinking either, though it is wish. It is hope embedded in the heart of a love allowed to form sheerly as love of God and neighbour; and only when love is given that independence will its own distinctive hopes be fruit that is good to eat. And among its fruits, rooted in the soil of biblical theology, is social activity... and if that is rooted in the will of God, it will accomplish whatever God purposes for it. To believe that suffices, on the level of the mind, for unremitting obedience in social responsibility.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> The whole argument of Beker on this point in *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel* (Fortress 1982) misfires if the argument of this lecture is valid.

<sup>26</sup> H. U. von Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic* (Ignatius Press 1987) 191.

<sup>27</sup> (Macmillan 1965) 120-43.

<sup>28</sup> This is the Pauline phrase but not what he meant by it.

<sup>29</sup> Liberation theologians may object that the whole argument of this lecture assumes that action follows reflection. The hermeneutical issues here are deep. It seems to me that the argument of the essay can accommodate this objection

I am grateful to Dr. Will Strange for pointing out, in relation to the argument of this essay, that the notion of the Kingdom is conspicuous by its absence. The reason is, of course, that my aim is not to eliminate talk of hope or Kingdom in relation to social action but to establish limits to hope and establish that such limits do not limit social action.<sup>30</sup>

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with minimal adjustment. This is achieved by saying that the whole of the foregoing simply captures a moment: the moment in the dialectical process of action—reflection when the latter is permitted to impinge on the former. If the proposed adjustment is hopelessly naïve then let the piece stand within the framework of the European bourgeois approach!

<sup>30</sup> This paper was delivered as the Tyndale Biblical Theological Lecture for 1988.