

BOOK REVIEW

Thiselton, Anthony C. *Life after Death: A New Approach to Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). xvii + 251 pp. Pbk. \$24.00.

Anthony Thiselton, professor emeritus of Christian theology at the University of Nottingham, known primarily for his work in hermeneutics, has written a relatively concise book on the end times after experiencing a near-death stroke a couple of years earlier. No doubt the book was spurred, at least in part, by his own experience, which makes it an interesting read.

He begins by introducing the topic of death in ch. 1, especially focusing on death itself—in spite of the fact that this topic is usually addressed from an impersonal, theoretical perspective—including personal and biblical perspectives and establishing the importance and ubiquity of death. In the second chapter, he establishes an epistemology of death and resurrection by surveying key, relevant Scriptures. He focuses on the language of promise, specifically the promise of the resurrection, using the paradigm of the speech act theory of Austin and Searle (he utilizes their theory throughout), who both assert that the language of ‘promise’ communicates on the part of the speaker the ‘commitment’ to follow through with a particular course of action. Relevant to this discussion is God’s promise of resurrection after death.

The next two chapters explore the concept of waiting and expecting as related to death and the afterlife. Chapter 3 introduces the role of sacraments (or ordinances, for those who prefer that term) for those facing imminent death. Utilizing the work of Calvin, Luther, Melancthon and other Reformers, as well as the Roman Catholic writer, Mervyn Duffy, he explicates how the word of God, sacraments and the covenant of God function to reassure believers of the certainty of the afterlife. Thiselton makes the point that believers go through their Christian lives, perhaps for fifty or more years, participating in the sacraments, many of which remind the believer of the blessed hope and promise of resurrection and eternal life. Many of these believers,

however, may forget the meaning of the very sacraments they have been engaged in for many years. Chapter 4 explores the concept of waiting in Scripture and how pervasive the need to wait is for the Christian. After a survey of the biblical idea of waiting, and associated with it the ideas of expectation and readiness, Thiselton looks at Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein explains that the crucial factor in expecting, in general, is not the mental state or processes that the person experiences but the observable actions or behavior that are elicited by the expected thing. When applied to Scripture, then, expectation of the *Parousia* for the believer means not focusing on any mental states or psychological beliefs about chronology but having a state of readiness. In other words, having an attitude of waiting and expecting relates to actions and behaviors that surround readiness rather than some sort of mental state.

The rest of the book addresses the more common theological discussions that deal with eschatology. Chapter 5 discusses the issue of whether believers enter into Christ's presence immediately, or whether believers enter into some type of intermediate state. Thiselton argues, utilizing the work of the secular philosopher Gilbert Ryle, that they are both compatible with each other and not contradictory. In other words, believers upon death enter into an intermediate state *and* Christ's presence, depending on the *perspective* by which one wishes to view it, either from a spectator's or ontological perspective, or as a participant or existential perspective, respectively. This chapter is helpful, not only for this particular dilemma, but for providing a tool to resolve other paradoxical statements in Scripture, even though acknowledging Ryle's probable dissent at applying his method to theology. Thiselton in this chapter also introduces the debate surrounding the millennium, whether it is a literal one-thousand-year period or symbolic, proposing that viewing this discussion through the spectator perspective or participant perspective is helpful (though he does not draw any firm conclusions at this point).

Chapter 6 is a survey of the New Testament's teaching on the return of Christ, which is a central topic in eschatology. Thiselton begins with word studies of certain Greek words, such as *parousia*, *epiphaneia* and *apocalypsis*, and then provides a survey of the various interpretations of select scholars. He establishes that a return of Christ is evident in the New Testament as well as the subsequent creeds and councils, but there

is no firm argumentation as to Thiselton's own view on the chronology and details of this event (or series of events).

Chapter 7 discusses the resurrection of the dead, with special focus on an exposition of 1 Corinthians 15. Thiselton asserts that the debate on an immaterial versus material (or physical) resurrection body is not as important to Paul, although he believes in a physical body, and that ch. 15 'sheds light on the whole Epistle' (p. 119). He loosely applies rhetorical categories, such as *narratio*, *refutatio* and *confirmatio*, to analyze this chapter, but I am not sure whether these categories can be applied to written discourse. The two major arguments of this chapter are, first, that 'resurrection from the dead constitutes a sheer *gift* of *God's sovereign, creative grace*, and not the fruition of latent capacities in the human soul' (p. 111). Although Thiselton claims that this is a new approach so far as it addresses an issue that is widely ignored, this seems to be a pretty standard mode of thinking, at least in conservative and Calvinistic circles. The second major argument is that the *spiritual* resurrection body is not in opposition to the material or physical body, and hence the resurrection body is not non-physical, but it is 'the mode of existence characterized by the Holy Spirit, the post-resurrection mode of being will be *ongoing, moving ahead, dynamic, and on-the-move*' (p. 128). While I appreciate that 'spiritual' does not simply mean 'immaterial' and is the opposite of physical, the question still remains regarding the precise nature of the resurrection body, whether it is physical or nonphysical.

Chapter 8 discusses the relevant issue of purgatory, or the alternative idea of believers inheriting immediate holiness upon the resurrection. Relying on the work of Jürgen Moltmann, Thiselton briefly reviews the origin of the doctrine of purgatory in the Medieval Church's doctrines of prayer and penance, a question not readily addressed by Protestants. He concludes that based on biblical exegesis, primarily interacting with 1 Cor. 3.11-15, purgatory cannot be substantiated. So the alternative is that believers enter into immediate holiness. Thiselton begins that discussion by defining holiness, not as simply high moral character but as *closeness* to God. He concludes the chapter with a discussion on the meaning of eternity, or time, not as strictly chronological but as having multiple categories, including our time, social time, clock time and God's time. Thiselton concludes that time is not just *one* thing but *many* things, but he lacks a conclusion on what 'eternity' would actually look like in light of this understanding.

Chapter 9 addresses the ever-popular issue of hell and wrath. Thiselton begins by identifying the three major views: annihilationism, universal restoration and everlasting torment. After summarizing the work of David Powys, Jürgen Moltmann, Tom Wright and the Evangelical Alliance Commission with respect to hell (and annihilationism, or conditional immortality or conditionalism as it is sometimes referred to), among others, Thiselton discusses the idea of wrath, noting various Hebrew and Greek words. However, the chapter ends without Thiselton providing his own view and reasons for holding that view, at least explicitly. The only thing that is clear is that none of the views are as clear as some have thought.

On a related issue, ch. 10 discusses the Last Judgment and the idea of rewards and retribution. The first part of the chapter addresses the question of what attitude believers should have in viewing the Last Judgment, either with trepidation or joy. It is unclear whether this is Thiselton's conclusion, or whether he is simply summarizing Raymond Brown, but he notes: 'The Last Judgment is not a source of fear to be repressed or swept under the carpet as a mere relic of Jewish apocalyptic, but an event to which Christians may look forward with joyful anticipation, although never with complacency or presumption' (p. 173). The second part of the chapter deals with the idea of retribution, and in quoting Marshall, he concludes that Western ideas of retribution have dominated Christian thought, when Hebraic ideas include a more relational nature of retribution. What that means is unfortunately not explained in greater depth.

On the other side of hell is *heaven*. Chapter 11 discusses the final state of the redeemed, specifically the concept of glory, or God's glory. Thiselton notes four meanings of glory. First, glory is not simply God's presence but a '*visible manifestation* of God's presence' (p. 186). Secondly, related to that, glory is God's glory as God Himself, his beauty as a part of that glory. Thirdly is the idea that to glorify God is to love God and enjoy him for who he is. Finally, the glory of God relates to seeing him face-to-face, although it is unclear as to how this is distinct from the first meaning of God's presence. The chapter closes with a discussion on the symbolic meaning of the book of Revelation, but again there is no distinctive argument or thesis, except that the notion of symbol is important.

The final chapter continues the discussion of the final state of the redeemed, focusing on the activities of the redeemed. A primary

characteristic is *joy*, which involves three key factors: (1) Christ's work will permeate everything; (2) the spiritual body will embrace our experience of God to an unimaginable degree; and (3) the Trinitarian process of prayer will become a heightened activity.

One of the strengths of the book includes Thiselton's interaction not only with theologians and biblical scholars but with a variety of philosophers as well. One of Thiselton's strengths in general is his utilization of the tools of philosophy in integrating biblical thought and synthesizing theology, as evidenced in his previous work in hermeneutics. Another strength is the unique perspective by which Thiselton approaches this topic. As mentioned above, most theologians approach the topic of death and the 'afterlife' from the perspective of eschatology, focusing primarily on the sequence of events that are to take place. While Thiselton addresses some of these necessary issues, he also addresses the more personal issues that are often overlooked, as well as issues from a 'new' perspective.

On the other hand, a major critique that I offer is that there seems to be some confusion between meanings of *words* and meanings of *concepts* in some of his analysis. For instance, in ch. 4 on waiting and expecting, Thiselton offers a helpful homily on the idea of expecting, but this is more of a philosophical exposition on what expecting entails, rather than a study of the meaning of the word *expect* (Thiselton refers to the *term* 'expect' being polymorphous or varied and to the 'primary meaning of the term' [p. 58]). The philosophical musing is indeed helpful, but it is certainly not a lexical analysis of the meaning of 'expect', to be sure. Another instance of word vs. concept confusion is in ch. 6, where Thiselton states that *parousia* is not only used of 'the presence or "coming" of ordinary people, but also especially a visit by the emperor or of a person of high rank' (p. 91). The examples given, however, are all within the Pauline corpus, and most of them refer to the coming of Christ, making the definition of *parousia* circular in reasoning. I have found that the same word in a few non-Pauline instances is used of the arrival of an army (2 Macc. 8.12), the coming of a multitude (2 Macc. 15.21), and the arrival of Judith, a captive (Judith 10.18). Furthermore, the same word is used of referring to the coming of the 'lawless one' (2 Thess. 2.9), so it appears that it cannot be substantiated that *parousia* is especially used in contexts of royalty or a high ranking person.

Another critique is that, while Thiselton offers a breadth of opinions regarding the various topics and subtopics in each chapter, I would have liked to have read more about his own conclusions and the reasons and arguments behind those conclusions. This is not to say that he did not provide any at all, but I would have preferred to have read more of his and less of others'. The book is more of a survey of who said what on the topic and less of a robust argument for a particular view, despite having the subtitle, 'A New Approach to the Last Things'.

Related to this, a final critique is that a specific thesis or argument that underlies this book seems to be lacking. While there is a helpful introduction to the book, a conclusion to sum up the major argument(s) is missing, not to mention the lack of a conclusion or summary for each chapter (they tend to end somewhat abruptly). Perhaps that is what Thiselton meant it to be, a survey of various views held by Moltmann, Barth and others, but that is not how the book is initially presented.

In spite of these critiques, the book would be useful for someone who desires to read a book on the 'last things' that differs from most books on eschatology. For someone to recover from a stroke and then to write such a book, despite my critiques, is certainly commendable and admirable.

David I. Yoon
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON