

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Faculty Publications

5-1-1976

Jesus Who?

William G. Johnsson
Andrews University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs>

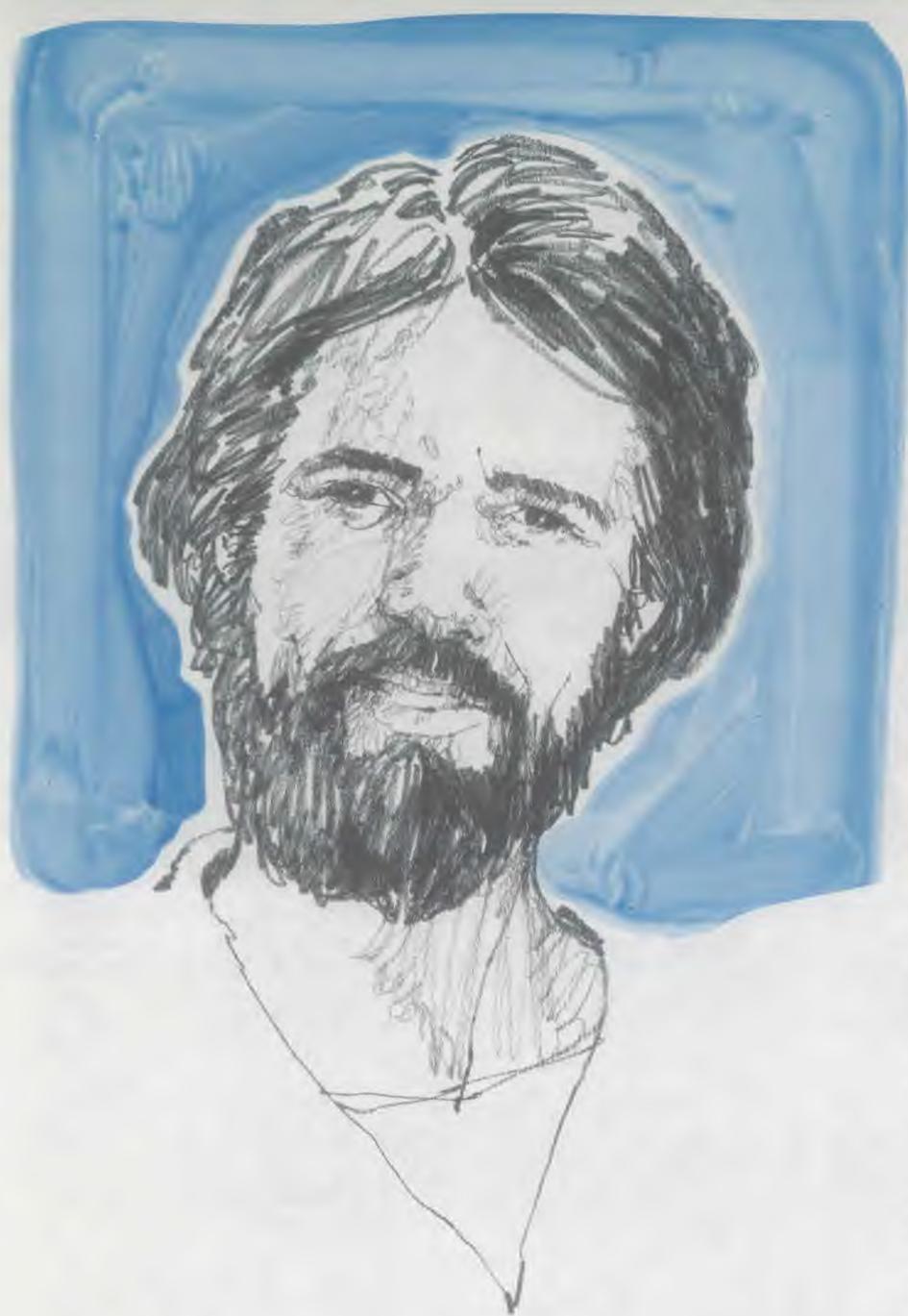


Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnsson, William G., "Jesus Who?" (1976). *Faculty Publications*. 4073.
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/4073>

This Popular Press is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.



Jesus who?

Just who was that man called Jesus? What does His life have to do with mine today, and tomorrow? And is He really coming again?

by William Johnsson

WHAT WAS Jesus Christ like? How did He live? These questions have attracted pens of scholars and laymen alike over the centuries. The nineteenth century saw a rash of interpretations of the "real" Jesus, a series that was brilliantly summarized and evaluated in Albert Schweitzer's famous *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.¹ Schweitzer, with words that cut like a rapier, showed how each writer had succeeded only in painting a picture of Jesus according to his own fancies.

Nor did Schweitzer escape that same trap of subjectivity. At the close of his work he gave *his* interpretation of Jesus: Jesus was a noble and yet tragic figure, one filled with apocalyptic vision and zeal who expected that His preaching would bring in God's kingdom in glorious power. At last, when He realized that His hopes were not to be realized, He cast Himself upon the wheel of fate in a last, desperate, divinely mad gamble to force the coming of the kingdom. And so, at the end of it all, He lay crushed on the wheel, His body broken—and the kingdom unrealized.

But was this in fact the "real" Jesus? On the basis of the Biblical records, we hold that Schweitzer's Jesus is as much a distortion as those of the "lives of Jesus" which he so effectively demolished.

But Schweitzer was right in one regard: Jesus was an apocalyptic figure, one forecasting the ultimate destiny of this world. Jesus *did* preach the nearness of the kingdom: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17*). He was vividly aware that His time was the turning point of the ages. The old era of the prophets lasted up to John the Baptist, but a new age was bursting upon the world (Luke 16:16).

In a series of short but powerful parables He spoke of the end of the old order and the coming in of the new; He called for "new bottles" to receive the "new wine" of His teaching, spoke of the reception of His gospel as seed falling in "good ground," talked about the discovery of the kingdom as a pearl of surpassing worth or treasure of inestimable value (Mark 2:22; *William Johnsson is associate professor of New Testament Studies at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.*

*All Bible texts are quoted from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

4:1-9; Matthew 13:44, 45). Likewise Jesus talked of the glorious coming of the Son of man in the clouds and spoke of the need for constant watchfulness for that climactic event when God's kingdom, which was now dawning, would come with dramatic power (Matthew 24:42; 25:13).

The evidence to us is undeniable: Jesus Christ lived a life that leaned, as it were, into the future. The future was God's, and it was dawning in His life and teachings.

But Schweitzer was wrong to this extent: Jesus was not *wholly* an apocalyptic figure. His vivid expectation of God's future was balanced by a concern with the "now." His life was delicately poised between the present and the future on the knife-edge of time.

The Sermon on the Mount, so often regarded as the high-water mark of His teachings, is almost wholly concerned with life in the present time. Here Jesus seems to say, What matters most for My followers is not so much knowledge of the future but a manner of life that befits citizens of the kingdom of God. Here we find the characteristics of those who will be members of that kingdom: the humble and the merciful, the pure and the fervent, the repentant and the persecuted. Here we see the high standard of moral conduct which is to mark their life-style, and we learn the divine ideal for their influence in the world: They are to be like light and salt, dispelling evil and transforming society (Matthew 5:3-16).

In famous words that come with compelling effect to modern man caught up in the rat race of the 1970's, Jesus turns our thoughts to the birds and the flowers. Don't worry so much, He admonishes. Don't be so anxious about your material wealth. And don't be so uptight about your security; "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Matthew 6:34, KJV).

These vital ideas were lived by Jesus. He was no wild-eyed apocalyptic figure, who at last lay broken in a vain attempt to usher in God's kingdom. Rather, He went to His death knowingly, willingly, resigned to God's will. He spent His last night on earth in the company of His friends, then went boldly to the cross on Good Friday. His death was indeed a violent and horrible one, but He went to it in peace.

This, then, was the life of Jesus Christ—a life that leaned into the future.

He knew the good things of life, a life that did not disparage food and drink, marriage and family, getting and spending. But just as surely did it look beyond the now. It was the life of hope, of buoyant expectancy, of joyful anticipation of God's purposes.

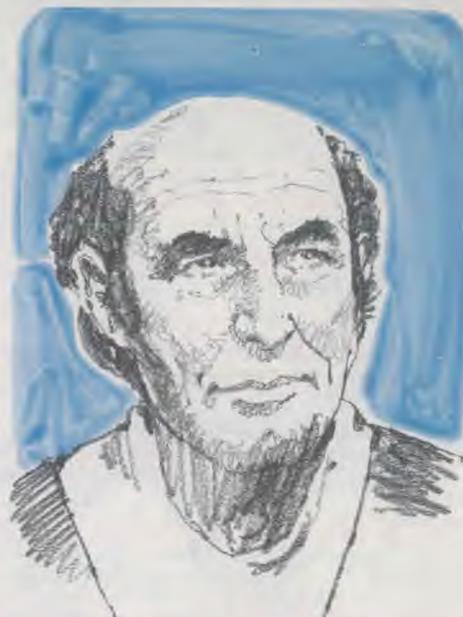
Paul's View of the Future

As one studies God's Word, it seems evident beyond question that the apostle Paul's thought was also based on the apocalyptic. His preaching is the Good News of the cross and the resurrection—and the raising of Jesus guarantees the Christians' resurrection. The entire chapter of 1 Corinthians 15 is devoted to this topic: "How can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" (verse 12).

To the Greek mind, resurrection was an illogical concept since man was thought to have an immortal soul imprisoned in his physical body. But Paul set out to correct this idea, showing that the Christian will be raised in the pattern of Christ's resurrection. Then he discusses the nature of the resurrected body, the argument rising to a grand climax in the well-known words: "Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51, 52).

Further, Paul's letters reveal that his life was characterized by a joyful *expectancy* of the resurrection. This same letter closes with his fervent one-word prayer—"Maranatha" (1 Corinthians 16:22, KJV). This is an Aramaic word which signifies "Our Lord, come!" Obviously it was a term which characterized early Christianity; originating among the Aramaic-speaking churches in the vicinity of Palestine, it was carried over to the younger, Greek-speaking churches such as Corinth.

So it is not surprising to find Paul's writings sprinkled with phrases which express the nearness of the end of all things. He writes about "the Day" or "that Day"; he describes the "flaming fire" of God's zero hour for the earth; he speaks of "the hope" which binds Christians together (Romans 2:5, 16; 13:12; 1 Corinthians 1:8; 3:13; Philipians 1:6, 10; 2:16; 1



The writings of the apostle Paul, encompassing more than half of the books in the New Testament, fairly radiate with the warmth of the expected Jesus—even though Paul realized that his chances of witnessing that event personally grew slimmer as his execution date neared.

Thessalonians 5:2, 4; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 4:13).

One term especially is to be noted—the *parousia*, the "appearing" or "presence" of Jesus. This was a word used to express the arrival of a dignitary, and Paul adopts it to convey the majesty of the Second Coming: "The Lord Jesus will slay him [the lawless one] . . . by his appearing and his coming" (2 Thessalonians 2:8).

Did Paul's Theology Change?

Did Paul gradually give up his hope in the approaching climax of history? Some scholars of the Bible have argued that he did. They admit the evidence of vivid expectation of the *parousia* in Paul's early letters such as the Thessalonian correspondence, but they make much of the decreasing emphasis on the end in his later writings.



John, the disciple "whom Jesus loved," authored five of the New Testament books. His final book, Revelation, concludes with the epic phrase, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus. . . . Amen."

This suggestion, however, is of questionable value and has been recognized as such in recent thought. It is a highly debatable procedure to argue from silence. For instance, in Romans we read almost the entire letter without finding direct reference to the Second Coming. Does this mean that Paul no longer considers it significant? Not at all, for suddenly we read: "Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand" (Romans 13:11, 12).

Now it becomes obvious that Paul has not dealt with the *parousia* in his letter, because there is no need to—it is already taken for granted by his readers.

It is true, of course, that as Paul neared the end of his life, he came to realize that he might not personally be alive to see the

stupendous events of the end. With the perils he faced day by day, he became more and more conscious of the fragility of human life. So at times we find him thinking out loud, as it were, on the prospects of his own death—as in his letter to the Philippians, written from jail. But the hope of the end, with its resurrection, is in no manner given up.

"We await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself" (Philippians 3:20, 21).

James, Peter, and John

Paul's earnest expectation of the *parousia* is echoed by all the writers of the New Testament. James, for instance, writes, "Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. . . . Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand" (James 5:7, 8).

1 Peter counsels in chapter 4, verse 7: "The end of all things is at hand," while the second letter contains the vivid portrayal of apocalyptic holocaust: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up" (2 Peter 3:10). Likewise, in 1 John 2:18 we are warned: "Children, it is the last hour."

These examples could be multiplied many times over. Perhaps the mood of Christian waiting, of facing the imminent acts of God, is summed up in the final promise of Jesus and the fervent response of the church. "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20).

It would be wrong, however, to hold to a one-sided emphasis on the *parousia* in early Christianity. The first followers of Jesus were no calamity howlers who crawled into their cave and waited for the Big Bang.

Naturally, apocalyptic fervor always allows that option—withdrawal from the world to physically await the end. The excavations around the Dead Sea in recent years have brought to light the existence of such a sect among the Jews. The famous Dead Sea Scrolls were, in fact, the scriptures of the group. Far away from the bustle and whirl of Jerusalem, out in the for-

bidding desert wastes, they planted their community, planning and anticipating the day of God's judgment on Israel and the world.

But that was not the pattern of early Christian living. The vibrant hope of the *parousia* was blended with the beauty, the joy, and the responsibilities of life in the now. They were disciples of Jesus Christ, attempting to follow in His footsteps—preserving and transmitting His words, imitating His life of gentle and noble deeds, proclaiming the claims of His lordship.

The new life in Christ to them was a reality, not merely promise or hope. The "kingdom" had not yet come in its full rule—that was their hope and their prayer, "Thy kingdom come"—but already it had dawned and its power was manifested among men. Two great affirmations were their rallying points: in the past—the resurrection of Jesus; in the present—the possession of the Spirit. Both radically reoriented life in the present; both guaranteed the future as God's.

It is this assurance concerning what God *has done* in Jesus Christ that gives New Testament Christianity its spontaneity and authority. Paul affirms, "I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (Romans 1:16). He goes on, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?" (Romans 8:1, 32). The Corinthians receive this word: "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

And in the first of the Johannine letters we find this: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. . . . Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:1, 2).

Paul's letters to the Thessalonian Christians show in a striking way the balance which is to be maintained in New Testament Christianity. In the first of these letters we find the believers troubled by the loss of loved ones. The Lord had not come and some of their number had died; what would happen to them? Paul's response

was to reaffirm the certainty of the Return as the grounds of hope: "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18).

In 2 Thessalonians the situation is almost exactly reversed: Now there is an overheated expectation of the *parousia*. Some of the Christians had misinterpreted Paul's words about the *imminent* end to indicate the *immediate* end. If the Lord was coming immediately, why bother to go to work?

Paul was quick to correct this distortion of his teaching. He pointed out that since certain events yet remained to be fulfilled before the Return, thought of immediacy should be put aside. As for the person who uses the doctrine of the Second Coming as an excuse to withdraw from his social responsibilities, "If any one will not work, let him not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10)!

Here indeed is living on the knife-edge of time! Either to lose the hope of the Return or to abandon the world in overzealous expectation of it is wrong. Rather, the Christian lives out of the present, poised for God's tomorrow.

The Second Coming and Our Day

More than nineteen centuries have rolled by since Paul wrote so confidently of the imminent *parousia*. Over those centuries the note of assurance has become ever more feeble. Occasionally there have been revivals of the hope, often in an exaggerated degree. As the year 1000 drew near, there were scenes of excitement and fear that the end was about to break. From time to time "prophets" have attracted a coterie of followers who have drawn apart from society in the expectation of doomsday. We still read in the newspapers of such sporadic survivals of the apocalyptic desire. Naturally, the life-span of these movements is short.

The centuries have accumulated until we are now in sight of the year 2000. Each date set for the Last Curtain, no matter

how strongly proclaimed, passes by. The world rolls on.

Is it realistic to still hold to the New Testament hope of the Second Coming? Should we now "face the facts," as it were, and admit the possibility that Jesus was simply *wrong*, Paul was *wrong*, the early Christians were all *wrong*? Does not the affirmation of the end automatically classify one with fanatics, "enthusiasts," and other unbalanced personality types?

These are the precise fears of many thinking Christians in these days. They have attempted to face the problem in one of two ways:

Response No. 1 is the denial of the apocalyptic element in New Testament thought. A school of interpretation, of which Professor C. H. Dodd of England is the foremost expositor, argues for "realized eschatology," that is, that the New Testament emphasizes the *present*—the "kingdom" has already come! It would eliminate the end-expectation in the experience of Jesus and all the early Christians.

But "realized eschatology" flies in the face of the evidence of the New Testament. While, as we saw, the first Christians are joyfully aware of the reality of Christian experience in the present time, this enthusiasm is tempered and balanced by the glad hope of the future return of their Lord, when He who is now acknowledged as Lord only in the church will be acclaimed throughout the creation as Lord of all.

Indeed, this belief seems to run a collision course with the entire Bible. The God of the Old Testament is a God who *acts*, one who continually intervenes on behalf of His people: He creates, leads out from Egypt, supplies the Davidic kingship, speaks through the prophets, brings back Israel after the dark night of exile. So there is always a note of expectancy: Yahweh is Lord of history, and so He holds the future in His hands. The God of the Old Testament is the God who continually comes—and so may be counted on coming again in the future. Thus, the Old Testament is a book of surprises, of unforeseen happenings, of divine intervention as Yahweh plays the chords of history, working out His mysterious purposes.

This note of divine surprise is lost when



Should modern man "face the facts," as it were, and admit the possibility that Jesus was wrong, Paul wrong, and the beloved disciple John wrong in their expectation of Christ's return?

one abandons the future to dwell upon the present. In fact, the conception of history undergoes a dramatic shift. I once heard a rabbi confront Christians on this point. "For you," he said, "history finished 2,000 years ago, but our history is never closed." It was a very good point, and one to be granted if we deny the expectation of the Return sounded in the New Testament.

Response No. 2 is more radical but more in keeping with the Biblical evidence. It frankly acknowledges the apocalyptic element in the New Testament, but it flatly states that wherever it is found—whether in Jesus, Paul, or John—it is *wrong*. Therefore, it is to be set aside by Christians today. This response is realistic: it has time on its side.

This view, furthermore, is in keeping with the prevailing spirit of the times. Many of the great thinkers of our age are



Thanks be to God that Christians today can possess a confidence in the appearance of Jesus Christ during the last acts of this earth's drama. This is the way of life's meaning. It is an appealing way.

concerned only with the meaning to be found, if found at all, in the fleeting moment. With an expectation of a meaningful future they have no patience; life is too filled with tragedy and stark contradictions for such an outlook. Existentialist writers such as Jean Paul Sartre and A. Camus vividly set out this view of life. A century that gave birth to two horrendous global wars, Auschwitz, Belsen, and My Lai has taught men to concentrate on the ever-fragile, ever-fleeing now.

But let us be quite clear. Those who choose to abandon the future and live in the present benefits of Christianity, *must be prepared to admit that they have drastically departed from New Testament Christianity*. Some sort of religious experience they may have, but why pretend that it is continuous with that of Jesus and the first believers?

The two responses we have noticed

above are apt to be painful to many Christians. The choice seems to be either to deny the full force of the Biblical data or to deny the evidence of history in the passage of time. Is it possible to turn from both responses and reaffirm the experience of Jesus and His early followers?

In terms of "following the Bible," there is no question that this is the position to be taken. But what are its consequences for the educated, historically attuned Christian, and what does it offer him?

1. The problem of meaning in human existence: This is the first advantage of adopting the New Testament "now—not yet" tension. It is the Biblical insight that God is Lord of history, that beyond the apparently disordered, random appearance that life presents there is a divine purpose and goal toward which the creation is moving.

Perhaps this is something which modern man needs to hear above all else. Since the work of Sigmund Freud, many people are no longer troubled by feelings of guilt, so that traditional presentations of the gospel leave them cold. But more and more, man is distressed with the senseless suffering, the grim hand of tragedy, "this monstrous thing that is life," to use Joseph Campbell's phrase.² Christianity that is lived on time's knife-edge not only speaks of the positive values of the new life in Christ now but also affirms with confidence the ultimate redemption of the present in God's glorious future.

2. The rediscovery of God: The modern, scientific era has seen a steady retreat on the part of "God." Indeed, many theologians proclaim that God is dead—meaning that the God of traditional Christianity can no longer be believed in and, in fact, has ceased to occupy any significant place in the life of modern man.

But the reaffirmation of the *parousia* turns the tables on this trend. It does not deny the contributions of science and technology, but it refuses to be enslaved by them. It is a ringing call to the Source and Ground of our being, to a personal deity interested enough in human affairs to become involved—at Creation, at the Exodus, at Calvary, and at last in the Grand Finale to the human drama. So it is a call to let God be God, to call Christianity

back to its roots as a *religion of the living God*.

Of course, this claim for the Return involves an act of faith. But that is of the very essence of the Christian religion.

The belief of the *parousia*, in fact, is the crystallization of the Christian message, the challenge to recognize Jesus Christ as *rightful Lord of Creation*. Because the world is His, it will at last be His—not by human power or might, not by political intrigue, not by education, but by the assertion of His presence.

3. What then of the long delay in the "parousia"? Does not this prove it to be a vain hope? Not at all. "Delay" is a term that is applicable only from the human view. Has the Return taken longer—much longer—than Paul expected? Undoubtedly. Has it been put off beyond the imagination of Luther and Wesley? Of course. But these were all human perspectives on the *parousia*. Because by His life and death Jesus Christ is rightfully Lord of all, from the human stance we wonder why He has not in fact acted to claim His own.

That is our viewpoint, not God's. Perhaps we need to realize that, like the stars in their appointed courses, God's purposes know no haste and no delay. Perhaps we need to be reminded of the long period of Messianic expectation that marked the Old Testament—would the Promised One ever come, or was the hope misguided? "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman" (Galatians 4:4).

Even so, in the fullness of God's time, will the Son again be sent forth for the Last Act in the drama of earth.

In the meantime we are to walk the knife-edge of time, doing our duty to the state, mindful of the call of our brotherman, but always leaning into the future, which is God's.

This is the way of life's meaning, of patient faith in His promises and purposes, and of Christian service patterned according to the life of Jesus Christ. It is an appealing way, and it is a possible way. We hold that it is the liveliest option for the man or woman today who takes seriously the teachings of God's Word. 

¹The German edition appeared in 1901.

²See his essay "Mythological Themes in Creative Literature and Art," in *Myths, Dreams, and Religion* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970).