

Reconciled in the end

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [November 10, 1999](#) issue

As the end of the millennium approaches, many Christians are preoccupied with questions that concern the end of the world. Here is one important eschatological theme on which you are unlikely to have heard a single word. When asked whether it is true that one day in heaven we will see our loved ones, Karl Barth is reported to have responded, "Not only the loved ones!" The sting of the great theologian's response—be ready to meet even those whom you dislike here on earth—is more than just a personal challenge. It contains a serious and, as it turns out, inadequately addressed theological problem.

How can those who have disliked or even had good reasons to hate each other here come to inhabit together what is claimed to be, in Jonathan Edwards's memorable phrase, "a world of love"? The not-loved-ones will have to be transformed into the loved ones and those who do not love will have to begin to do so; enemies will have to become friends.

A sense that such a social transformation is a condition of "heavenly" existence may lie behind a funeral practice in Germany in which a kind of postmortem reconciliation between the deceased and his or her enemies is enacted in the form of prayer. Participants in the burial service remember, before God, those whom the deceased may have wronged or those who may have wronged the deceased.

Popular piety is also aware of the issue. In tightly knit Christian communities one sometimes hears the injunction that their members had better learn to love each other now since they will spend eternity together. Sometime between a shadowy history and an eternity bathed in light, somewhere between this world and the coming world of perfect love, a transformation of persons and their complex relationships needs to take place. Without such transformation the world to come would not be a world of perfect love but only a repetition of a world in which, at best, the purest of loves falter and, at worst, cold indifference reigns and deadly hatreds easily flare up.

Traditionally, the last judgment along with the resurrection of the dead was taken to be the site of the transition from this world to the world to come. But if the need for transformation of persons as well as of their complex relationships is a real one, the question is whether the last judgment, as usually conceived, can carry this weight. Consider Martin Luther. Of the various candidates from the Christian tradition, his understanding of the last judgment is most likely to constitute a kind of transition from this world to the world of perfect love.

The thought of judgment according to works, which dominated the tradition, is not absent, but is integrated into the overarching judgment of grace. For believers, the last judgment is not so much a process by which the moral quality of human deeds is made unmistakably manifest and appropriate rewards and punishments apportioned, but rather, and above all, an event in which sinners are forgiven and justified. Christ the final judge is none other than Christ the merciful savior. "To me," writes Luther, "he is a physician, helper and deliverer from death and the devil." Jesus says, "Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away" (John 6:37).

Luther interprets him to mean, "Let it be your one concern to come to Me and to have the grace to hold, to believe and to be sure in your heart that I was sent into the world for your sake, that I carried out the will of My Father and was sacrificed for your atonement, righteousness, sanctification and redemption, and bore all punishment for you. If you believe this, do not fear. I do not want to be your judge, executioner or jailer, but your Savior and Mediator, yes, your kind, loving Brother and good Friend. But you must abandon your work-righteousness and remain with Me in firm faith. Divine judgment at the end of history completes divine justification, grounded in Christ's redemptive work, in the middle of history."

Yet it is not clear how the final justification of the ungodly would as such create a world of love, not even if we take it to include what Friedrich Schleiermacher has called the "complete sanctification." No doubt it would ensure that we would meet in the world to come even those whom we have not considered particularly lovable in the present one. But for us to love the unlovable, two things would need to happen.

First, in a carefully specified sense, we ourselves would need to "justify" them, and, given that they may consider us no more lovable than we consider them, they would also need to "justify" us. We would all need to receive this justification from each other. Second, above and beyond giving and receiving justification, we would also need to want to be in communion with one another. To usher in a world of love, the

eschatological transition would need to be understood not only as a divine act toward human beings but also as a social event between human beings; more precisely, a divine act toward human beings which is also a social event between them.

Put in the form of a question about the perpetrator and the victim of the first violence in primal history, the challenge that Christian eschatology must meet is this: If Cain and Abel are to meet again in the world to come, what will need to have happened *between them* for Cain not to keep avoiding Abel's look and for Abel not to want to get out of Cain's way?

Surely, the response must go something like this: If the world to come is to be a world of love, then somehow and somewhere in the course of the transition from the present world to that world of perfect love, Cain and Abel must reconcile. The transition must include not only the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment but also the final social reconciliation.