

THE FUTURE OF THE FUTURE

PETER J. LEITHART

What will the world look like in fifty years? If present trends continue . . .

- The United States will still be the world's military and economic superpower, though Japan, India, Brazil, and maybe China will have closed the economic gap.
- We will have (or have had) the first African or Asian Pope. Perhaps the second will too.
- Because of declining populations, European nations and the United States will open borders and offer incentives to attract immigrant labor. The wealthy will buy robots to perform household chores.
- Public universities will be almost unknown. University faculty and students will be 80% female.
- Russia will break up into smaller units. The war on terror will be a distant memory.
- Advances in communications technologies will further de-centralize business and manufacturing. 3-D "printing" will permit companies to base plants nearly anywhere.
- The U.S. Supreme Court will have made gay marriage the law of the land.
- In most districts, public schools will be run by private corporations.

- Tim Tebow will not be in the Hall of Fame.
- We will be able to purchase cars customized to our preferences, but except for a few intransigent holdouts, we will all be driving hybrids.
- California? What's California?
- American Evangelicalism will have been through twenty-three new fads, but there will be a solid and growing number of serious Evangelical churches.
- More movies will be produced in North Carolina than in Hollywood. India will be the global center of the film industry.
- Less than a quarter of children will grow up in traditional two-parent families.
- Poland will be the dominant power in Central Europe.
- Spurred by wars, energy research will introduce alternatives to fossil fuels into the domestic economy.
- Abortion will remain a Constitutional right.
- All of my predictions, and those of other writers in this volume, will be viewed as laughably short-sighted.

Of these, the one I am most confident of is the last, though I am morally certain about the Tebow prediction too.

"If present trends continue" is the operative, and problematic, phrase. They never do. History is full of failed predictions because history is full of surprises.

"Surprise" is theological as well as an historical category. It is a central theme of Christian eschatology, and eschatology is the very shape and substance of Christian faith. Through much of early modernity, eschatology played a minor role in Christian theology. To early modern rationalists, lurid medieval visions of final judgment, hell, and apocalypse seemed passé, the products of primitive symbolist minds. During the past century, however, eschatology made a startling comeback. For most, this was not a recovery of interest in the "millennium," a side issue for much of the Christian world. Rather, scholars came to see that eschatology is what Christianity is about.

Building on this rebirth of eschatology, the German-American thinker Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy argued in *The Christian Future* that Christianity is itself the “the founder and trustee of the future.” Prior to the coming of Christ, the world was a post-Babel world of “divided loyalties – races, classes, tribes, nations, empires, all living to themselves alone.” Pagan histories were multiple; despite some anticipation, pagans had no firm conception of universal history or a universal destiny for the human race. Pagan histories were also cyclical and pessimistic, picturing “human life as a decline from a golden age in the past toward ultimate destruction in the future.” Fulfilling the hopes of Israel, Christ’s advent decisively, permanently changed the world. In place of the multihistory of paganism, Jesus proclaimed a single eschatological destiny for all humanity. For Jesus, history is story rather than circle. Creation has a beginning and a middle, and it will have an end.

The Christian future did not emerge from paganism like new grain unfurling smoothly from the soil. On the contrary: Jesus created a unified future by the “apocalyptic” catastrophe of the cross and resurrection, which has become the pattern of Christian hope. As Rosenstock-Huussy puts it, Jesus “overcame man’s dividedness by living once for all the specific law of the human kind, namely, that man can progress from fragmentariness to completion only by surviving the death of his old Adam, his old allegiances, and beginning new ones.” Because of Jesus, Christians live from death rather than toward death. Because of Jesus, Christians are capable of breaking through the ruts of ossified tradition into a future that is not simply “more of what has already been.” Jesus brought future into the world, which is to say, He brought the divine gift of surprise, the apocalyptic essence of Christian eschatology, which is the essence of Christianity.

In the light of Jesus, we can see that every event that opens up a future has this same structure. The first glance of a true lover; the birth of a first child; a life-changing rebuke from a trusted friend or pastor – each is a shock, a wound to the heart, a doorway opening into a world of unimagined light. In the proclamation of Christ’s death and resurrection, we are confronted with a “word-event”

whose function is, as Robert Jenson says, to issue a “challenge to become other than I am The word is most purely word . . . as the address in which one man involves his life in with that of another, in which he pledges himself to him – in which a promise opens a new future.”

Jesus brought the climactic surprise, but surprise is the way of God from the beginning. Abram was, we may imagine, contentedly worshipping the gods beyond the River when the glory of God called him away to a land he had never seen (Joshua 24:2-3; Acts 7:2-5). Joseph could hardly have anticipated a visit from his brothers, nor could his brothers have dreamt of encountering Joseph, Prince of Egypt. The Pharaoh who forgot Joseph could not have imagined that Egypt’s changeless world could come apart at the seams. God redirected history by planting a dream in Nebuchadnezzar’s mind (Daniel 2), and by keeping Ahasuerus sleepless in Susa on a crucial night (Esther 6). When Yahweh brought Israel back from captivity, they were “like those who dream,” hearts well with laughter and tongues with singing for the great things God had done (Psalm 126). The pattern is so consistent that we begin to suspect what the New Testament affirms to be true: God is not simply a God who happens to surprise. Surprise, future, eternal freshness, innovation, youth is the very essence of God’s nature. My colleague Toby Sumpter likes to say that God is eternally Child, the Son eternally born again from the Father. As Jenson says, to say God is a living God is simply to say that He has the capacity to surprise.

If God is infinite Surprise, man is by contrast a knotty bundle of resistance. We do not like to change and stretch: It may be a rut, but it is cozy and it is mine! Korah did not like the innovations of the Aaronic priesthood. No doubt there were conservatives in the time of Samuel and Saul and David and Solomon who wanted to go back to the good old tabernacle days and grumbled about having to contribute to building an expensive temple. Judaizers resisted the novelty of the new covenant even to the shedding of blood. Many centuries later, Catholics were resistant to the reforming efforts of Luther, Calvin, and others. New is not necessarily good,

of course, but we should be suspicious of the ease of staying put. Inertia is not the same as bearing the cross. At least, Korah's fate should give pause to anyone whose instinct is to stick with "what we have always done."

All this must be the central Christian answer to any questions about the future of the future. Whatever the future holds, we can be certain that it will not be merely a projection from the present. A century ago, who could have predicted that Pentecostalism would be, as Philip Jenkins says, the most successful social movement of the twentieth century? Who could have anticipated that Africa would burst into bloom almost as soon as the missionaries packed up? Who could see ahead of time that "God is Red," that He gathered and built a millions-membered church in the midst of the suppressions of Maoist China? We cannot even know for sure if the future will continue to be an obsession for Christians of the future. That too is subject to divine surprise.

We might stop there with a shrug and an anticlimactic quotation from Hamlet: "The rest is silence." That is not just anticlimactic, but paralyzing. Future hopes give direction to our present actions, and diffuse hopes lead us in every direction at once, which is the same as no direction.

We can do better. Above I introduced what might be taken as a contradiction of my thesis by referring to a "pattern" of surprise. Can surprises be organized into a discernible pattern? Can we anticipate the acts of a God of boundless, infinite freshness?

We can, and the trick is to stick to basics. Scripture is a symphony of themes and variations. It begins with a garden, moves through a fall and a slow decline into violent chaos, until God intervenes ("apocalyptically") to wash the world clean and start over with a new man in a vineyard, who bears sons who fall from grace and are scattered from the Plain of Shinar. Then God begins it all over again on a larger scale with Abram and Sarai. Again and again, the same sequences recur, with variations: Creation, fall, judgment, recreation; slavery, exodus, conquest. Knowing what comes next depends on knowing where you stand on the story-arc, and that depends on getting our bodies attuned to the choreography

of history, and that depends on deep study of Scripture. The better we know the Bible, the more accurate our expectations for the next round of surprises. For example: After Israel reached its height of power and prestige under Solomon, God tore it in two, Israel and Judah. Only in exile, were Israel and Judah reunited into the one people of the “Jews.” That history does not deterministically require that the church divide and reunite. But in fact the church has divided, tragically so, and we can begin to grope our way through the ruins of divided Christendom by learning the melody line of Israel’s history backward and forward. We can anticipate the Lord Jesus will lead His church by the Spirit through the gravestones of exile toward a miracle of reunion. We are in the latter part of Act 3, but we know how the play ends and we can move now toward the denouement.

For another example: One of God’s most characteristic surprises is the exaltation of the lowly, the centralization of the marginal. God called Abram out of Ur to be the father of the nation that will bless all nations, and raised David from the sheepfold. His Son was born in a manger and raised in Nazareth of Galilee. Over several centuries, the small band of Christians huddled in Jerusalem had transformed the Roman Empire and created a new, Christian civilization. This gives us a rule of thumb: If you want to catch the wave of the future, ignore the mainstream and the centers of power. Look for the backwater Galilees where the Spirit quietly rustles His feathers.

For a final example: God does not let human beings shed innocent blood forever. He shakes persecutors until their impregnable fortresses tumble to the ground, and He will not overlook our own cruelty to countless unborn children. He takes His time (another pattern of surprise, a necessary delay to give punch to the punch line). Late or soon, to the dread of His enemies and delight of His people, the Judge of the earth does right.

Study of the Bible gives us a “roadmap” of the future not because it predicts events of the twenty-first century. It does not. It gives us a roadmap because it reveals our God’s habits of surprise. Better, it directs our hopes because it reveals the God of habitual

surprise. To know the future is to know Him, the One who will not stop until He has summed up all things in the Son, who will deliver the kingdom to the Father that God may be all in all.

Peter J. Leithart is a Senior Fellow of Theology and Literature at New St Andrews College, Moscow, Idaho. He has written a number of books, including Athanasius, Defending Constantine, and most recently Between Babel and Beast: America and Empire in Biblical Perspective.