W. C. Coetzer: Pauline eschatology and ethics – a critical evaluation of Martin Dibelius.

ABSTRACT
According to one approach the theology of Paul can only be understood from his eschatological viewpoint. On the other hand there are those who put the emphasis on the present. The way in which Dibelius formulated the relationship between these apparently opposing viewpoints will serve as a framework for discussing the relation between ethics and eschatology.

Since the end of the nineteenth century exegetes have more and more recognized the fact that eschatological language is not just something on the periphery of the New Testament, but that it is basic to the understanding of the theological perspective of the early Christian community. Albert Schweitzer is known for his viewpoint that apocalyptic holds the key to the understanding of both Jesus Christ and early Christianity. At a later stage Käsemann (1969:102) supported this approach by saying that apocalyptic is the mother of all Christian theology.

On the other hand there were those who did not place so much emphasis on eschatology as a key to the better understanding of the theology of the early church. Gardner (1911) maintains the viewpoint that although eschatology sometimes dominated Paul's thoughts it did not really have much effect upon his ethics. It had no power to nullify it. Apocalyptic theology is also pushed into the background in Bultmann's program of demythologizing the New Testament.

We could thus say that on the one hand there is the approach according to which the theology of Paul (as well as that of the early church) can only be understood from his eschatological viewpoint. On the other hand there are those who put most of the emphasis on the present, the here and the now, and within this approach the paraenetic literary genre usually plays a prominent role. The viewpoints of Dibelius concerning this matter, raised as far back as 1919 and 1926, are still relevant and worth debating. The way in which he approached and formulated the relationship between these apparently opposing viewpoints will serve as a framework for discussion and evaluation in this paper. His viewpoint will briefly be presented and then be used as a basis for discussing the relation between ethics and eschatology in the Pauline letters.
0 DIBELIUS
Historically it is difficult to ascertain when the autocratic rule of the eschatological preaching was terminated and when the independent function of the paraenesis came to the fore. According to Dibelius there is no other explanation than to accept a direct relation between this process and the growing need of the community in view of the delay in the parousia. Due to pressure resulting from the delayed parousia all preceding ethical guide-lines were integrated. Paul's approach could thus be taken as typical of what was happening in all mission situations. The Christian ethic was thus not basically new but in due course supplemented from situation to situation with material that had been taken over. All the material thus adopted was then applied to a life \( \varepsilon \nu \chi \rho \iota \sigma \tau \omega \) while the \( \varepsilon \nu \chi \varphi \iota \omega \) was also added.

Pauline eschatology is mainly characterized by the debate concerning the delay in the parousia. The profane paraenetic material is used by the eschatological preacher to motivate and formulate the faith in Jesus Christ on a world-ethical basis. In due course the church would then integrate the theological substance of its kerugma into this process. It was no sudden revelation that the end of the world was not imminent; it was a notion which developed in the course of time. The result was that at no specific stage was the radical eschatological self-consciousness of the \( \varepsilon \nu \chi \eta \lambda \nu \sigma \sigma \alpha \) brought into relation with the idea of an ongoing world and the necessary consequences thereof were thus not drawn from this. The further result was that for a number of years afterwards the emphasis in the paraenetical praxis of the church focussed on \( \text{ad hoc} \) solutions while the eschatological-ethical problem was repeatedly forced into the background and the basic need for a decision still remained.

The basic viewpoint of Dibelius is thus that because of the special needs of the community the primitive church was compelled to turn to the profane source for its world-ethical reflection and concrete world-ethical guide-lines. Through the integration of a false eschatology the result was an absolute affirmative and conservative world ethic. Dibelius consequently endeavored to bring to an end the integration between the present ethic and the profane ethic and wanted to move on to a Neubau of a Christian world ethic.

I EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE ON DIBELIUS'S VIEWPOINTS
In Dibelius's approach there is little room for the thought that Paul placed the moral which he received in a positive eschatological horizon and that in this process he created a new significance and basis of
coherence. On the contrary the "Verzögerungs"-problem, according to Dibelius, is the main characteristic of Pauline eschatology. The dimensions of the eschatological presence are consequently viewed from a very limited perspective (Hasentab 1977:48).

A few thoughts from Ridderbos (1966:550) could be illuminating in this regard. According to him the experience of the parousia was a real possibility for Paul. It was the object of his hope and expectation although this expectation was not a sine qua non for either his religious life or his paraenesis. The strength of his future expectation as well as his paraenesis was certainly based on the appearance of Jesus Christ in glory, although it was not necessarily dependent upon his own physical experience of this appearance. In this regard Ridderbos points out the inseparable and mutual connection and unity between the perfectum and futurum of New Testament eschatology in general and Pauline eschatology in particular. In this the actual motivation and essence of the pronunciation of the nearness of the parousia is to be sought. Paul based his viewpoint concerning the nearness of Jesus Christ's parousia not upon any special knowledge or insight concerning the term within which the parousia could be expected — concerning this aspect he especially acknowledges his ignorance (1 Th. 5:1, 2) — but it is rather connected to the overwhelming significance of the eschatological time of salvation which has already arrived with the first coming of Jesus Christ. Ridderbos does not regard the nearness of Jesus Christ's second coming as an issue which faded in course of time and moved into the background.

The dialectic between present and future which is deeply imbedded in Paul's way of thinking thus presents us with important perspectives within the debate concerning ethics and eschatology. In this regard the Pauline idea of the Pneuma is also important because it is the focal point of the dialectic between present and future. The presence of the Spirit indicates that the "power of God for salvation" (Rm. 1:16) is already in action. On the other hand the Spirit is the bearer of that which is still to come and thus serves as a basis of hope — already present but pointing towards the future.

The eschatological dimension of Paul's preaching and paraenesis never creates the impression of a depreciation of life in the present world. Paul rather takes a stand against those who, because of their expectation of the parousia in the very near future, demonstrates less appreciation towards the present life (2 Th. 3:6ff.). Kaye (1975) convincingly argued that the eschatological material in 1 and 2 Thessalonians contains positive ethical consequences.

Dibelius's viewpoint regarding the relation between ethics and
eschatology is very closely connected to the thesis of the *Naherwartung* and the *Parusieverzögerung*. In his discussion of Dibelius’s approach in this regard Hasentab (1977:51) points out that no reference is made to the new being (*neuen Sein*) as a basis for the integration of world ethics. On the contrary much value is attributed to the view-point that the integration of the profane heathen ethic was executed by Paul only in a passive sense. This view-point also does not show enough evidence of the fact that creation theology is the collective horizon against which all Pauline theology and ethics are to be considered and that consequently also his eschatological approach must be elucidated from a creation-theological basis.

As already indicated the great problem with the Pauline eschatology, according to Dibelius, is the fact that at no given historical point was the *Naherwartung* replaced by something else and digested theologically. Eschatology would thus time and again be the obstacle which hampered an original turning to the world as God’s creation. Consequently the early church constantly moved from *interim* solution and from one *ad hoc* decision to another *ad hoc* decision. Against this approach Schrage maintains a very firm view-point. According to him Paul’s emphasis is not so much one of situation ethics. The loose way in which the individual exhortations are connected in the paraenesis would confirm this fact. The aim is not towards a specific situation, because Paul would have had a much broader vision in mind. In spite of all similarities it is also, according to Schrage, not possible to refer to a “simple identity” shared by the Pauline ethic and that of the surrounding world. The useful and serviceable elements from the Jewish and Hellenistic world were taken over and these ethical conventions were made serviceable to Christianity. What obtained general validity since the earliest times was taken into consideration by Paul when formulating Christian ethical guide-lines. In this regard he could for instance refer to that which is according to nature (“the general view”, 1 Cor. 11:14); in Romans 1 and 2 he uses the rabbinical equivalent of the “law of nature”; like a Stoic he refers to that which ought to be and that which ought not to be (Rm. 1:28) and he also appeals to man’s conscience. In this regard Davies (1981:175) maintains the view-point that even the “apostolic decree” of Acts 15 most probably makes use of conventions pertaining to every living soul and were given to Noah, the father of mankind, even before the revelation at Sinai. The argument of a pure *Interimsethik* does thus not seem to be watertight in every regard. Davies is convinced that the early church also did not understand it in this way, because it clung to the ethical guide-lines which had been established and transmitted even when the hope of an
immediate termination of the existing order had already faded.

Against the viewpoint of Dibelius (and others) regarding a periodically adapted Pauline approach towards eschatology, as well as the associated loose basis of *ad hoc* decisions, the standpoint of Mearns (1981) is worth considering. He states that the most significant change and development in Paul's way of thinking did not only take place during later stages of the Pauline writings but already at the beginning of his correspondence. The development of a futuristic eschatology within the early church was, according to Mearns, stimulated by the following four factors:

The effect of the growing number of Christians who in spite of putting on the resurrection body, nevertheless died.

Paul felt the need to counter and correct the radical realized eschatological and charismatic enthusiasm of his converts at both Thessalonica and Corinth, by deploying a futurist eschatology.

There was a need to modify the teaching of the imminent Day of the Lord. Paul swiftly moved, between 1 and 2 Thessalonians, to introduce a "signs scheme" before the last day.

The fourth factor converging with the other three was the crisis of the Caligula episode in A.D. 40, arousing the expectation in the apocalyptic tradition of a climax to the forces of evil of such vividness and violence, in the form of "antichrist", that it could only be put down by the immediately following Day of the Lord.

From the exegesis of the letters to the Thessalonians and especially in view of the above-mentioned arguments, Mearns thus maintains the viewpoint of a momentous change in Paul's early theology, from realized to futurist eschatology.

Concerning the question of Paul's handling of individual crisis situations as well as the criteria according to which he made certain pronouncements, one should certainly take into consideration the movement and interaction from context to text which were constantly taking place. Wall (1983) regards this aspect as the fundamental structure of Biblical ethics. In his ethical exhortations Paul is not trying to lay down a set of rules but is actually endeavouring to illustrate the kind of life which is supposed to originate from a belief in Jesus Christ. Paul's ethical pronouncements also have an eschatological character in the sense that he is trying to illustrate which kind of life will be blessed by God at the second coming of Jesus Christ.

2 CONCLUSIONS AND GUIDE-LINES
The exclusive emphasis which Dibelius places on the eschatological
future of the world’s end and parousia results in the fact that there is a very limited view of the eschatological presence in Paul’s approach.

It is important to take notice of the perspective regarding the unity between the *perfectum* and the *futurum* of the New Testament eschatology.

The dialectic between present and future as far as the relation between ethics and eschatology is concerned is also important. In this regard the Pauline concept of the *Pneuma* is important because it is representative of the *eschaton* which is breaking into the present era.

The eschatological material in 1 and 2 Thessalonians in no way points towards an abdication of ethical responsibilities with regard to conduct for the present life. On the contrary, this aspect is rather emphasized and confirmed.

Creation theology presents us with an important perspective in judging and evaluating the Pauline eschatology.

For Paul there is a close relation between eschatology and ethics. He puts eschatology in the service of the ethical discourse in a supportive role.

The thesis of a pure *interimsethik* is not acceptable. Paul had a much broader vision in mind than pure *ad hoc* decisions. He incorporates and integrates conventions and practices which were applicable since the earliest times.

It would seem that the most significant adaptations in Paul’s eschatological thinking already occurred at a very early stage of his correspondence. Because of this, the viewpoint of an eschatological approach which was periodically adapted in the course of time as well as the loose basis of *ad hoc* decisions, is not tenable.

In the evaluation of Paul’s ethical decisions it is important to take into consideration the interaction between text and context.

With the material, sources and conventions which were part of his frame of reference Paul developed an independent paraenetical *praxis* and did not make use solely of the eschatological exhortations in apocalyptic.

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