

## **An Eschatology of Certainty and Possibility** Revisiting the Eschatological Ethic of Paul

In his paper, *An Eschatology of Hope*, David Norris provides a solid argument for the inheritance of hope by Modern Pentecostalism from the eschatology of the Reformers. Norris convincingly notes that the Reformers replaced a Catholic eschatology of “expected judgment” with an eschatology of “expected hope” through their refuting of purgatory. I agree with Norris that, like the Reformers, Apostolics carry over an eschatology of hope and that “an intense eschatological has been the catalyst for any number of revivals since the Reformation.” However, I contend that such an intense eschatology has not served Apostolics well as Christ’s return lingers into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At times such an intense eschatology has created a dominant ethic of imminence regarding Christ’s return which has led to poor planning, unsustainable growth and disappointed hopes within the church. This paper will argue that as Apostolics we should take the same posture in our eschatology as the Apostles attempted to create in the New Testament church. This posture was one of Christ’s certain return and possible imminence.

It is clear that early church believers struggled to finding the proper eschatological voice. Believers in Thessalonica thought Christ’s return was just around the corner and believers in Corinth forgot that they were still awaiting the Day of the Lord.<sup>1</sup> While several NT authors wrote concerning “the last things” the writings of Paul serve best in offering a corrective eschatology to the early church. At times Paul would write concerning the Last Days to moderate expectations, and other times to stimulate expectations. By surveying the corrective eschatological writings of Paul we discover a balanced eschatology which encourages the church

---

<sup>1</sup> Ben Witherington calls the errors of both Thessalonica and Corinth an “over-realized” eschatology to which Paul prescribes a “wait and be prepared” correction although for different reasons. Kent E. Brower and Mark W. Elliot, editors, *Eschatology in the Bible and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1997) p. 177

to derive hope from a certainty in Christ's return while living with the possible imminence of His appearance.

For Paul eschatology is a case of "already but not yet". He writes of eschatological events with a pattern that recognizes what already happened and what was yet to happen. For instance he speaks of his converts as 'sons of light' which is a "Semitic idiom for being a product of a particular era."<sup>2</sup> A convert could not be a product of an era that does not yet exist. However, Paul was comfortable speaking of a 'not yet' time when perishable would put on imperishable and mortal would put on immortality (1 Cor. 15:54). In Paul's mind being a 'son of light' and anticipating an 'immortal body' was acceptable, since both states of being were a part of the eschatological era. For Paul the resurrection of Jesus Christ was not a historical event followed by a 'delay' in Christ's promises, but rather the primary evidence that the eschatological age was in progress.<sup>3</sup> It was Paul's certainty in the 'already' Resurrection that gave him confidence in the 'not yet' parousia.<sup>4</sup> It is the "already but not yet" perspective of Paul that should influence our language of eschatological imminence today. A brief survey of Paul's writings is in order to inform our eschatological ethic.

Apparently it was difficult at times to distinguish from possible imminence and definite imminence in Paul's preaching. This difficulty resulted in Paul writing to the Thessalonian church to clarify his previous eschatology comments. In Thess. 5:1-2, Paul references the fact that his teaching on "times and seasons" was not new but rather a reiteration. He recalls having

---

<sup>2</sup> Witherington, *Eschatology in the Bible and Theology*, p. 181

<sup>3</sup> I agree with Witherington who disagrees with A. Schweitzer's theory that Paul first believed the end of the age was imminent but then had to modify his eschatology when the return of Christ delayed. It is incorrect to define NT eschatology in terms of "imminence and delay", see Witherington, *Eschatology in the Bible and Theology*, p. 172

<sup>4</sup> Parousia or Second Coming. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the differences of opinion regarding the timing/nature/inclusion of the Rapture and Return of Christ.

used the metaphor of a thief in the night to explain Christ's coming.<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that the thief's appearance will be sudden to both believers and unbelievers. The difference for the believers is their preparedness, so while they are taken unaware they are prepared for the suddenness of the event. For Paul such a preparation is linked to the saints being "children of light" which is a reference to their salvation in Christ. Indeed Paul re-affirms the Thessalonian believers readiness with the words, "God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him."<sup>6</sup> The emphasis of Paul is on the certainty of their salvation, not on a lacking sensitivity to the imminent return of Christ. In fact, Paul seems to curb their over-zealous eschatology by latter saying "admonish the idle".<sup>7</sup> Paul would command in his second letter that "idle saints" be avoided altogether.<sup>8</sup> It appears that as the result of a strong belief in Christ's imminent return certain Thessalonian believers were doing nothing in the interim. Paul calls the saints to be alert and to be active, not because he knows the return of Christ is definitely imminent, but because Christ's return is certain. Paul began his comments with a disclaimer that the Thessalonians had no real need for Paul to address matters regarding the timing of the Lord's return. It seems improbable that if Paul felt the return of the Lord was definitely immanent he would preface his remarks with such a disclaimer. While Paul re-iterates the suddenness of Christ's return he is not attempting to motivate the Thessalonians to soberness through the language of definite imminence.

---

<sup>5</sup> The metaphorical use of a "thief" to represent the coming Son of Man is used by Jesus in Luke 12:40. It is a metaphor repeated by Paul (1 Thess 5:2), John (Rev. 3:3) and Peter (1 Pet 3:10) and always refers to the coming Day of the Lord.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:9,10 ESV, all scripture quotations are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:14

<sup>8</sup> 2 Thessalonians 3:6

If the Thessalonians where “camped out” waiting for the return of Christ, the Corinthians where “living it up” as if the Spirit had already brought them into the fullness of salvation. From the beginning of his letter Paul emphasizes that he wants the Corinthians to lack no spiritual gift as they “wait for the revealing of the Lord.”<sup>9</sup> It is interesting that Paul will give the Corinthian group the longest discourse on spiritual gifts (chap. 12-14) and the nature of the resurrected existence (chap 15).

It seems that the Corinthians were guilty of living completely in the eschatological “already” and had forgotten the eschatological “not-yet.” Paul calls the Corinthian believers to live in the “now” still under Paul’s parental guidance.<sup>10</sup> In order to further make this point Paul satirically contrasts their eschatological error with the daily challenges of his own apostolic ministry. He notes, “Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings!” But then he adds, “I wish you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you, for I think God has exhibited us apostles as last of all...we are fools for Christ’s sake...”<sup>11</sup> Paul goes on to list his many troubles and hardships. Its almost as if you can hear Paul asking, “What do we Apostles have to do to arrive at the level of you Corinthians?” Even Paul’s teachings to them on practical matters such as settling disputes incorporates a reminder that there is more to come, “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world...Do you not know that we are to judge angels?”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:7 *so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

<sup>10</sup> 1 Cor. 4:15-16 “you have not many fathers...be imitators of me”

<sup>11</sup> 1 Cor. 4:8-10

<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor. 6:2-3

The culmination of Paul's corrective words are found in 1 Corinthians 15 where he discusses the "not yet" bodily resurrection. David Norris is right to posit that a proper evaluation of the Reformers eschatology is "to assess the doctrine of life after death" based on the merits of Scripture.<sup>13</sup> As J.C. Beker comments, "Resurrection language is end-time language."<sup>14</sup> For Paul the Pharisee his inherited eschatology has been altered most by the "narrative of Christ's career".<sup>15</sup> As was asserted earlier it is Paul's certainty of Christ's "already" resurrection that guarantees the "not-yet" resurrection of believers. Paul can offer Corinth no greater proof of the "yet to come" eschatological events than the resurrection of Christ. In his own words he asks, "If Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?"<sup>16</sup> He then links his own apostleship to the resurrected Christ and argues that if there is no future resurrection with Christ then "we are of all people most to be pitied."<sup>17</sup> When these comments are taken in light of Paul's previous corrections to the Corinthian's behavior, it is obvious that he wants them to stop living as if their will never be a future coming and final judgment.

It is important to note that despite the severity of the Corinthian misdeeds and indulgences, Paul never calls for corrective behavior based on the definite imminent return of Christ. Again Paul is calling the believers in Corinth as in Thessalonica to place their trust in the certainty of Christ's "already" resurrection while keeping in focus the possible imminence of His

---

<sup>13</sup> David Norris, "An Eschatology of Hope," A paper delivered at the 2010 UGST Symposium, Florissant, MO, Oct. 22, 2010, p. 12

<sup>14</sup> J.C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) , p. 152.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Witherington, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World*,(Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1992) p. 185.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Cor. 15:12

<sup>17</sup> 1 Cor. 15:8,9 "he appeared also unto me. For I am the least of the Apostles,"; 15:19 "If in Christ we have hope in this life only..."

“not-yet” return. As Paul says, “Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end...”<sup>18</sup>

This paper has offered more of an eschatological nuance from Norris’ paper, and not an outright difference of opinion. I agree with Norris that as Apostolics, “we would suggest that a biblical view of the end of the world is very important.”<sup>19</sup> However, I would suggest that as Apostolics our language of eschatology needs to be re-informed by the biblical text and not just by earlier Pentecostal revivals. Too often Modern Pentecostal’s have allowed their eschatology to be driven by speculations regarding “end time events” and signs of the times. This speculation has led to interim periods of revival fervency in which the church has grown, but such fervency is not sustainable nor conducive to church stability. Thessalonica and Corinth are two examples of imminence errors that were caused by a timeline focus. While eschatology is a concept that definitely involves time, it does not always involve a calculation of time.<sup>20</sup> Paul’s eschatology did offer a “schedule” of end time events, but he did not connect those events to a timetable.<sup>21</sup> J.C. Beker rightly notes that, “Paul’s Christian hope is a matter of prophecy, not a matter of prediction.”<sup>22</sup> Paul offers an eschatological ethic grounded in the “already” but with added urgency by the possible imminence of Christ’s return.

There is an additional reason for bringing our language of eschatology more in line with the biblical text and that is the character of God.<sup>23</sup> The eschatology of Scripture does include

---

<sup>18</sup> 1 Cor. 15:23, 24

<sup>19</sup> Norris, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Witherington, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World*, p. 233.

<sup>21</sup> 2 Thess. 2:1-12

<sup>22</sup> J.C. Beker, *Paul’s Apocalyptic Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> See Millard Erickson’s discussion of Jorgen Moltman’s “Eschatology of Hope.” Moltman attempts to answer the “character issue” of how an all loving God can allow evil in the world by defining an eschatological problematic and placing the issue into the hands of men who are the “mediators of the future of a powerful and loving God.” Millard Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), p. 50

God's judgment but it does not paint a fatalistic picture of the future. A proper eschatology does not lead to a fatalistic vision of a world waiting to be abandoned by God, but rather it leads to a futuristic vision of hope. A scriptural eschatology is one of world-transforming not world-negating. We must remind ourselves that "the creation was subject to futility, not willingly, but...in hope, that the creation itself will be set free...and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."<sup>24</sup> As Apostolics we honor God by remembering that "in the beginning God", let us equally honor him with a biblical eschatology that says, "in the end God."

---

<sup>24</sup> Romans 8:20, 21