

Our Earnest Hope

There is something that is undeniable, and yet perplexing, about the early church. It is something that spurred on the apostle Paul and appears to have been a stimulus for all the church in those days. Yet it is something that is largely absent from the thoughts of the modern church. This missing ingredient is an earnest expectation of the swift return of the Lord Jesus in glory and power, to bring the world to its conclusion and the kingdom of God to its consummation.

The early church thoroughly expected the Lord to return imminently, consequently they gave their all to building up the church and witnessing to Christ. The apostles were inspired to write the words of the New Testament and had deep insights from the Holy Spirit. They were told about things that would soon happen, such as a famine in Judaea or forthcoming persecution. And yet, looking back from our perspective, they were completely wrong about the timing of the Second Coming. Not until John's writing of Revelation was there any question that Jesus' return was imminent, but even this book ends with the encouragement, *Surely I am coming quickly* (Rev 22:20).

How do we explain this? What is the relevance to us? Firstly let's look at some examples of this.

The expectation of the apostles

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive *and* remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep ... Then we who are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. 1 Thess 4:15-17

Though Paul's reference to 'we' may be a literary technique to mean any believer, his emphasis seems to imply that he genuinely thought he would be alive when the Lord returned.

Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord *is* at hand. Phil 4:5

The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Rm 13:12

But this I say, brethren, the time *is* short ... For the form of this world is passing away. 1 Cor 7:29, 31

For Paul, the Lord's coming was 'at hand,' i.e. imminent (the word means 'near').

... not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching ... For yet a little while, *and* He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Heb 10:25, 37

This is self-explanatory, the apostle (Paul?) believed the Parousia (Second Coming) would be soon.

But the end of all things is at hand. 1 Pt 4:7

Although Peter in his second letter exhorts believers to be patient since the Day had not yet come, here he affirms that the Day is not far off.

Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See *how* the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Jm 5:7-8

This also is clear, for James the coming is soon.

Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. 1 Jn 2:18

For John writing late in the first century, it was the last hour, not the last days. This cannot be clearer, all the apostles believed that the end was imminent. By this they meant within their lifetime. There was no point even planning for families according to Paul; get on with witnessing since the Lord's appearing is soon (1 Cor 7:29ff).

Yet the Lord has not yet returned after 2,000 years. The apostles were wrong in a massive way. Is this a mistake?

It is no mistake

God is sovereign, all things are under his complete control. God is not going to confuse his chosen apostles on something as important as the end of all things. In the Old Testament, God inspired the prophets to be accurate in cases of minute detail. Over and over God's spokesmen were 100% on the ball in their forthtelling. Why would God allow his final spokesmen to be misguided about such an important issue? Surely those entrusted with the last words of Jesus would have even greater authority than Old Covenant prophets?

This means that there is a divine purpose in his witnesses being zealous for the return of his Son. There is something important in God's men being so confident in the imminent return of the Lord that they live in the constant expectation of it. They look up at the clouds every day to see if today is the time the Lord returns on them.

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. Matt 24:30

Jesus said to him, '*It is as* you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.' Matt 26:64

Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. Mk 13:26

Behold, He is coming with clouds. Rev 1:7

Living in the power of the Spirit

Two key things set apart the church experience of the apostolic age: the first is its imminent expectation of the Lord's return; the second is the massive power and sacrificial zeal with which believers witnessed to the Lord and spread the message of the kingdom. Is it not possible that these two factors go hand in hand?

Is the church growing exponentially in these days? No! Is there solid growth and maturity of believers? No! Is there a powerful and faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ in the world? No! Is there a true expectation and earnest hope of the Second Coming amongst believers? There is not! The sort of hope that Christians have held for centuries has been replaced by various doctrinal fads that focus attention upon the here and now. Most modern believers have more expectation of a powerful world-church experiencing global revival than the Lord returning soon.

We need to understand something about the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church.

The Spirit is the helper that Christ promised his people on being received into heaven. He is the one charged with bringing the things of Christ to us and guiding us into all truth. He also convicts the world of sin. The Spirit has a goal. This goal is the consummation of all his work in this age, the work of bringing Christ to us, leading us into truth, sanctifying us, preparing us for heaven and convicting of sin. This goal is the consummation of the kingdom when his work is over and Christ comes to take his elect people to himself. It is finished when we are changed in the twinkling of an eye to be like Christ himself. In that day the Spirit's current work is over. He is working towards that goal - the goal of the revelation of Christ in glory on the clouds of heaven. His objective is the end of all things. He is fully focused on doing all God's will to bring this end about, when the last elect member is converted.

When people are fully empowered and inspired by the Holy Spirit, when they are energised to do God's work with godly zeal, they become focused upon what the Spirit is working towards. The Spirit's objective becomes their passion. God doesn't work in a vacuum; he works by relationship. He works in us to supply the will and the energy (Phil 2:13). We do God's work in the closest partnership with his Spirit. As we work hand in hand with his Spirit to witness to Christ, we are caught up with the Spirit's passion and objective - the Lord's return.

The more we allow God to use us to his glory, the more we will be transfixed and inspired by the thought of the imminent return of the Lord. There have been many times in church history where God poured out his Spirit, in what is sometimes called revival, and changed the state of the church from apathy to zeal. In these times many outsiders were converted. A characteristic of such times of wholehearted commitment to God's purposes was an imminent expectation of the Day of the Lord. Such an expectation often gripped outsiders, and fear of soon meeting a holy God in their sin worked towards bringing them to repentance.

There is also a sense in which the realm of the Spirit is outside time and space. In the Spirit we are seated with Christ in glory (Eph 1:2:6), in the Spirit we are already glorified (Rm 8:30). In the Spirit, the consummation of all things is at hand and this world is but a passing mist.¹ The more we fellowship with the Spirit and submit to his guidance, the more we will not only be focused on his objective, but it will seem to us that this goal is on the verge of completion.

Conclusion

A focus on the last things is an important feature of true church life. The New Testament mentions the end frequently. One in every 25 verses refers to the Second Coming. Of the 27 NT books, 24 have references to it. Of 270 chapters in the NT, 216 have references to it. Paul's earliest letters deal with eschatology, while the last book in the Bible is full of it. Yet today, even in godly churches committed to the truth, eschatology is seen as a contentious matter, best avoided. People are not given proper instruction, often for fear of upsetting a few in the church who may have differing views. This is wrong. Eschatology is a locus of Biblical doctrine that should be preached as much as any other section. People who have no sound teaching on this subject will end up being enslaved by whatever books they read or people they listen to. This is poor pastoring. We must encourage the Lord's people, teach the Biblical truth about the end, and encourage them to have an earnest hope in the Lord's return. Alongside this, we must also teach people to truly learn about

¹ Ps 39:5, 11; Jm 4:14.

the ministry of the Holy Spirit and seek his empowering at all times. It is a good daily prayer to ask to be filled with the Spirit.

In the light of early church history we should ensure that the hope of the Gospel, the Second Coming of the Lord and all it entails, should be taught effectively and used as a principal means of constant exhortation.

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