

# **APOSTOLIC ESCHATOLOGY – EMBRACING THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

By

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When we look at the different definitions (many of which are only speculations) of the end time, it should not surprise us that so many believers, including Christian leaders, feel that teachings on eschatology have divided the church. This becomes very obvious when one notes the great number of books on the “end time”, of which many propagate different views and interpretations of the same scriptures dealing with the last days. We must remember that any doctrine which appeals to selfish desires or fears, such as dispensationalism with its escapist end time mentality, creates false centres. And these false centres become false viewpoints which lead to a faulty understanding of truth. As a result, there has been a tendency in many churches as well as conversations amongst believers, to steer away from this subject.

The question that many sincere believers often ask in this regard is, why make such an issue of the different view points about the end time if we all believe that Jesus is coming back anyway? Does it really matter?

I believe that it certainly matters.

My conviction is that the way we see the future, impacts the way we live in the present. Our quest for that accurate, apostolic vision of the future, therefore, is not a pet doctrine; neither is it a luxury. As Jürgen Moltmann reminds us, “From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionising and transforming the present... Hence eschatology cannot really be only a part of Christian doctrine. Rather the eschatological outlook is characteristic of all Christian proclamation, and of every Christian existence and of the whole church.”<sup>1</sup>

Eschatology, however, must be Christ centred. A more accurate definition which does not eclipse Christ in eschatology is a study of **Christ** and his future. The reason is that the “last days” started with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. We can therefore safely say that Christianity **is** eschatology in action. And that means Christ is the foundation for the entire doctrine of the end. As the theologian Karl Barth once succinctly put it, a “Christianity that is not entirely and altogether eschatological has entirely and altogether nothing to do with Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In Riddlebarger, Kim. *A Case For Amillennialism* (Baker Books, USA 2003) p.43

<sup>2</sup> In Hunt, Stephen. *Christian Millenarianism* (Hurst & Company, London 2001) p.2

## ***The Dispensational Hermeneutic***

It is true that when some Christians are asked about eschatology, the first thing that usually comes to mind, is the idea of a secret rapture. And although the general perception is that this position about our Lord's return is held by most Christians, the truth is that only a small minority fall into this category. The reason for this perception is fairly obvious. This minority view seems to have the ability to dominate the popular Christian media. The dispensational teaching about a secret rapture has been proclaimed by certain popular American television preachers to such an extent that many Americans (as well as some viewers in other nations who receive these broadcasts) assume that it must be in the Bible. In addition, the ongoing tensions in the Middle East, generate enough sensational news to fuel this end time view.

The secret rapture theory, however, is only one of the pillars that support the dispensational view of the end time.

In order to understand where these theories that underlie the dispensational system of interpretation are coming from, we must identify the two basic presuppositions: (1) The literal interpretation of the prophetic scriptures and (2) the distinction that is made between the church and Israel (God's purposes for the church and Israel being mutually exclusive). Through this interpretive grid follow other dispensational beliefs such as a "third Temple" that must be built in Jerusalem and which would then be desecrated by the antichrist, the "great tribulation" and a literal 1000-year "millennium" during which Christ – after his return – would establish a Jewish kingdom on earth, ruled from Jerusalem. During this time the sacrifices of the Old Testament would be reinstated again. What most people who embrace the dispensational view do not know, is that **these foundational presuppositions stand or fall together!**<sup>3</sup>

Apart from the inconsistencies and self-contradictions of this futuristic system, great damage has been done to sincere believers who bought into this end time doctrine. Dispensationalists believe that the kingdom of God is essentially the future earthly reign of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem associated with the glories of an earthly millennial reign. It is this fact – that dispensationalists have transferred the kingdom of God from this present age, and postponed it to hypothetical and mythical "dispensation" yet to come – that has robbed countless believers of their present mandate to live the victorious life now. The result is that such believers always seem to look for an escape from this earth in which the devil seems to have the upper hand.

The future literal fulfillment of the pre-millennial view is not a trivial or neutral issue. If we argue for a seven-year tribulation preceding the Second Coming which is succeeded by a 1000 year "Golden Age", we have robbed the saints of their present position in Christ. Their faith for now, has been undermined and their victorious expectation in this

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<sup>3</sup> For a fuller exposition of the inaccuracy of these themes, see *The Church that is Left Behind* by Kobus Swart – which can be ordered from Southern Harvest Publishers, Box 5532, Helderberg, 7135, South Africa. Also from Xulon Publishers USA, or [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com)

life has been supplanted by a survival mindset, awaiting a victorious millennium somewhere in the future.

## ***The Kingdom of God***

Where dispensationalists frequently get into trouble, is when they insist on a literal Old Testament interpretation of a prophetic theme that has been reinterpreted in the New Testament in the light of the Messianic age which dawned in Jesus Christ.

What God promised in the Old Testament, came to pass when Jesus the Messiah, introduced God's universal kingdom rule as a working power into the present. We see a beautiful prophetic picture of this event in Daniel 2:44,45 where a "*stone (which is Jesus according to 1 Pet 2:6-8) that was cut out of the mountain (referring to God's universal rule) without hands...*" The kingdom of God is, therefore, absolutely transcendent in its origin. It is not only concerned with God, it also originates with Him. It is pre-existent and eternal, (Jesus himself taught us to pray, "for **Thine is** the kingdom...") and came into this world in the divine miracle wrought in Christ. From that time on, therefore, the presence of God's reign will always be of Christological character. Jesus himself has spoken of the kingdom as a present reality (Mark 1:15, Matt 12:28). But we must also take note of the fact that Isaiah reminds us that there will be no end to the *increase* of His government and of peace (Is 9:7). The kingdom of God is a growing reality. Like leaven, it will impact every other realm on earth till all is leavened (Matt:13:33). Even as the kingdom advances throughout this age, the final eschatological victory or consummation is won by Jesus Christ himself at his Second Coming when the saints will be resurrected; after which he will deliver the kingdom back to the Father (1 Cor 15:24,54).

In the meantime, if we look at the world around us with our natural eye, we might agree with the author of Hebrews who said, "...*we do not yet see all things subjected to him*" (Heb 2:8). And because of this, reformed writers concluded that the kingdom of God is hidden beneath its opposite: "...its freedom is hidden under trial, its happiness under suffering, its right under rightlessness, its omnipotence under weakness, its glory under unrecognisability."<sup>4</sup> This perspective by Moltmann is not, however, the final picture of the kingdom of God. Its "paradoxical hiddenness under the contrary" is not its eternal form. In fact, there is a reality even now in the invisible realm of the spirit. We see that when John was on the isle of Patmos, he was called to "*come up here*", he was "*in the Spirit*" (Rev 4:1,2), and from this realm he viewed things from the finished position. He was therefore able to say, "*The kingdom of the world **has become** the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.*" (Rev 11:15). Reality is always *first* in the realm of spirit. "...*while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal*" (2Co 4:18). That is why it is wise to always follow the conclusion given by the author of the epistle to the Hebrews following his observation in verse 8: "...*but we do see Him!*" (Hebr 2:9).

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<sup>4</sup>In Riddlebarger, Kim Ibid p.p.43,44

We find a similar picture in the story of Elisha and his servant, when they were surrounded by the enemy. While his servant became fearful, the prophet told him calmly, "*Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.*" Then Elisha prayed and said, "*O LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.*" And the LORD opened the servant's eyes and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (2Ki 6:16,17).

This confirms the prophetic picture given to Daniel: "*In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever* (Dan 2:44).

O, how God's people have to pray for open eyes! In all senses, that which is hidden is destined to be brought to the light.

### ***Sonship***

What the Lord is emphasizing afresh in this apostolic season, is the need for mature sonship. John reminds us that, "...as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become sons of God" (John 1:12). For too long, believers have rejoiced only because their sins have been forgiven. What is needed is to grow into mature sonship – those who have overcome the evil one with his lies (1 John 1:12-13). Jesus says that he will build his church upon those who received a revelation of who the Son is, and give them the keys of the kingdom (Matt 16:16-19). Daniel puts it this way, "*Then the royal rule and the authority and the glory of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the people of the High God*" (Dan 7:26,27 Msg). The government of God will be administered by mature sons in the earth, filled by the Spirit of God, decreeing, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!" (Matt 6:10).

### ***The reign of the sons***

It is clear that in this season, the strategy of the enemy behind dispensationalism with its indiscriminate futurism, is being exposed. The power of the gospel is being restored in the hearts and lives of believers as they discern the enemy's agenda to make them wait for some future golden age before they will rule and reign with Christ.

The idea of the present reign of the saints with Christ on earth is common in the New Testament. Paul says, "*For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign **in life** through the One, Jesus Christ.*" The context clearly indicates that this is in the present earthly reign with Christ. In Colossians Paul explains clearly that when we are born again, we are delivered from the kingdom of darkness, and transferred to the kingdom of God's dear Son. To claim that this reigning only refers to an alleged millennium in the future, Hamilton argues, would not help the pre-millennialist, "for it is the believers, not the Jews, who reign with Christ, and the literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies demands that it shall be a *Jewish* kingdom. Not only are the adopted sons and daughters part of the royal family, sharing

Christ's reign with him in the spiritual realm now, but they will also reign with the Father and the Son throughout all eternity."

These believers are not looking for an escape from this world because of worsening conditions around them. Instead, they are more aware of the fact that he (the Holy Spirit) who lives within them is greater than he (the spirit of lawlessness) that is in the world; that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father waiting until his enemies have been made a footstool to his feet! There is a growing awareness that the responsibility rests upon believers to partner with the Holy Spirit so that Jesus can present to himself a church without spot or wrinkle at his return. This church is not to be a struggling church, needing to be rescued from the forces of darkness. In Jesus' high priestly prayer he prayed, "*I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one.*" (John 17:15).

There remains therefore, a generation – a **finishing generation** – without whom the finished works of Jesus will never be fully manifested. Without them, all those who died in the faith without having received what was promised, will not be made perfect. Those believers upon whom the ends of the ages have come, will experience an accumulation of the faith and anointing handed down through previous generations. They will grow into Him who is the Head and will see the Christ manifest in the fullness of his body. Satan must be finally crushed under their feet, and in so doing, they will execute the victory of Calvary. This **one corporate man** will cross the finishing line victoriously! Until then, Jesus will be kept in the heavens. The restoration of all things spoken of by the prophets of old must first be fulfilled. Only then will he return! (Acts 3:21)

Instead of being held captive by a barren, senseless existence, awaiting rescue out of this earth as dispensationalism would have us believe, God's various expressions of power and energy never become stagnant. The dynamic activity of the indwelling Holy Spirit in the believer is always ready to empower those who will participate in the final execution of the victory accomplished by Jesus in his first coming. Sadly, in the Pentecostal/Charismatic season, the role and function of Holy Spirit was limited by many believers to the exercise of some of the gifts, like speaking in tongues in meetings, and other "anointed" experiences which seldom left anyone transformed; in stark contrast with what Jesus experienced after the Holy Spirit came over Him in Luke 4:14-19.

### ***An administration suitable***

What is presently needed on earth more than any other time, is an administration suitable to partner with the Holy Spirit in order to present every man complete in Christ. Leaders who persist in designing programmes and methods to keep believers happy in the outer courts of Christianity, catering for the consumerist mentality, will find themselves disqualified in this season. A fresh sense of purpose is required and that purpose is clear – to bring the Body to its full stature.

Many have enjoyed the winds of revival and refreshing over the years. God is continually gracious and there continue to be seasons of visitation at different times in different

places. Seasons, however, are by definition not enduring, nor are they worldwide. Responses to them often divide Christians. These seasons reflect God's sovereign goodness; they come in spite of us, not because of us. The institutional church at large has become a bag with holes, not able to contain the blessings of God. What we desperately need, is that new wineskin which brings a lasting expression of kingdom life in Christian communities to impact their surrounding cultures and eventually "kingdomise" the earth. Ministries must establish apostolic communities, which will be the salt of the earth and light of the world.

Those who walk under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, have been delivered from the domain of darkness, and transferred to the kingdom of God's dear Son. Has the absence of accurately proclaiming the gospel of salvation as the gospel of the *kingdom*, been responsible for the divisions amongst the people of God? For believers to walk in their governmental mandate, they have to come into that kingdom relationship – an allegiance to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.