

The Tension

Living today between 'this age' and 'the age to come'

THE LAST DAYS

Jesus and the last days

As the Jews looked forward expectantly to 'The Day of the Lord' they anticipated one cataclysmic event, which would fulfill all their hopes and all the promises of God, in one divine moment. However, history and revelation have shown that what the Hebrew prophets anticipated as a single divine moment at the 'omega point' in history, has turned out to be much more complex in nature. From our standpoint we now see the truth enshrined in the idea of the 'Day of the Lord' to be paradoxical.

On one hand we can still speak of the 'Day of the Lord' as a great climatic moment, which is still to come, at the very end of history:

'The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon blood,
before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.'
(Joel 2:31)

While on the other hand, the 'Day of the Lord' has in fact already begun. It begins with that unique act of God in Jesus. It spans a time period, which begins with the incarnation of Jesus and runs through until that climactic moment of Jesus' consummation of all things in the *parousia*. The 'Day of the Lord' embraces all the days of Jesus' public ministry, death, resurrection and ascension, plus Pentecost and the whole period of the church right up to the present day and beyond. So the 'Day of the Lord' is both inaugurated in the past, a present reality and still longed for, anticipated and to come.

The New Testament also speaks about this time between the 'Day of the Lord' inaugurated and the 'Day of the Lord' anticipated as 'the last days'. Peter makes this clear in his quotation, again from Joel, on the day of Pentecost:

'... this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel,
"In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh ..."
(Acts 2:16-17; cf Joel 2:28)

Living in the last days

We are living in the 'last days' at this moment. God's people have been doing so ever since Jesus' incarnation and this will continue to be the case until the divine work is complete at the *parousia*.¹

¹ This is an important point to stress because generations of Christians have referred to the phrase 'last days' as though they were speaking of a particular period of time just prior to the return of Jesus at the *parousia*, a sort of 'final generation that will see the end'. As shown here this is completely mistaken and has skewed eschatological thinking for many Christians



Jesus is the 'key' and the 'cornerstone' to 'the last days'. They begin in Jesus' person and work; he initiates them, they unfold through him, and they are all caught up into him in the end.

So all the events between the 'incarnation' and the *parousia*, though separated in time, are from the eternal perspective just one event. So as we study of the diverse elements that make up the 'last days' and the 'end times' we must constantly recognise the fact that they all are features of one single event: God's *eschaton*; this single crisis that culminates history and gives it meaning.

PENTECOST AND *PAROUSIA*

A double promise

(Jesus) charged them not to depart from Jerusalem,
but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said,
"you heard from me, for John baptized with water,
but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit" ...

This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you
saw him go into heaven"
(Acts 1:4-5,11)

Here, either side of the actual event of the ascension we hear Jesus making the clear promise of both the 'Pentecost' experience and the *parousia* consummation. The first would take them across a threshold into a new dimension of being and empower them to begin to live as Jesus had personally done and enable them to proclaim the message of the kingdom of God with power. The second would change the world, as we know it forever, liberating it into the full experience of the new heaven and the new earth.

The physical time and the spiritual tension that lies between these two dramatic events creates the environment within which the church is called to discover its identity and embrace its mission.

Promise of power

The death and resurrection of Jesus combined 'messianic kingship' (Isa 9:6-7) with 'suffering servanthood' (Isa 53) to embrace the consequence of sin for all people and to defeat the power of evil for all time (Mk 10:45; Col 2:9-15).

Jesus' resurrection broke the power of death and demonstrated triumph over it, releasing the full fruits of his victory to all who live by faith in him (Jn 11:25-26; 1Cor 15:20-28; 54-57).

The ascension of Jesus was a dramatic demonstration of the true nature of eternal kingship, 'he ascended far above all the heavens that he might fill all things' (Eph 4:10). It was a manifestation of Jesus' divine glory to humanity (the word 'clouds' spoke of the *shekinah* glory of God). The event recalls the imagery of Daniel's vision (Dan 7:13-14), and the experience of the transfiguration (Mark 9:2-7), the ascension sets the scene for,



and focuses attention upon, the *parousia* (cf. Dan 7:13; Mk 13:26; Acts 1:11) as we shall see below.

Creative breath

Pentecost baptised the people of God into the experience of the life of 'the age to come', and made them full participants in the 'last days':

- Jesus breathed on them, and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (Jn 20:22);
- 'Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high' (Lk 24:49);
- 'You shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit' (Acts 1:5);
- 'You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you' (Acts 1:8);
- '... this is that spoken by the prophet Joel, "In the last days ... I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh"' (Acts 2:16-17).

The eschatological community, which had been in embryonic development during the days of Jesus' ministry, was 'born' as the *ekklesia* at Pentecost. They become the 'body of Christ' within the world and agents of God's 'end time' rule. The dynamic power and the mighty rushing wind of the spirit upon the little community (Acts 2:2) was the breath of God breathing into them and bringing a 'new humanity' into being as at creation (Gen 2:7). The eruption of praise and tongues was the response of the 'newborn' filling its lungs and gasping with the air of heaven, inhaling the atmosphere of the new age. This celebration of the 'life of the age to come' contrasts the limitations of obedience to the Torah that the *Shavuoth* (Pentecost) festival commemorated.

Kingdom and the Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the person of the Godhead through whom the power and reality of the kingdom is manifest, and experienced by women and men.

The Hebrew scriptures saw 'the age to come' as the 'age of the spirit', (Ezk 36:26-28; Jer 31:31-34; Isa 11:2; 44:3-4; 61:1-2). Peter emphasises this when he proclaims that God declares, "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh ..." (Acts 2:16-17; Joel 2:28-29).

Jesus states clearly, 'If I by the Spirit of God cast out demons, you know that the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Mat 12:28). Only those born of the Spirit can enter the kingdom of God (Jn 3:3-5). It is only by the Spirit that the kingdom 'in the midst of you' can become the kingdom 'within you' (Lk 17:20-21).

The life of the Spirit is the life of the kingdom (Rm 14:17). The life of the Spirit is the 'taste' of the powers of the age to come, the 'foretaste' of glory, and the 'promise' of complete fulfillment (Rm 5:4-5; 8:15-17; 23-25; 2Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13-14; Heb 6:4-5).

It is by the spirit that our present lives are inseparably linked and caught up with the resurrection life of Christ. We are one with him (Jn 14:18-23; 15:1-5; Rm 6:1-4; Gal 2:20; Eph 2:5-6; Col 2:12; 3:1-3; etc):

- 'Lo, I am with you always even to the end of the age' (Mat 28:20);
- '... there I am in the midst of you' (Mat 18:20).



Promise of presence

‘ ... awaiting our blessed hope,
the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,
(Titus xx:xx)

Following the gift of the life of the Spirit at Pentecost, the eyes of the Christian community have been fixed on the complete fulfillment of what that gift promised in the *parousia* (coming, arrival and presence) of Jesus the Messiah.

Christian hope does not rest in the belief that in some general way history will work out satisfactorily according to God’s pre-ordained plan. Rather our hope rests exclusively in the person of Jesus: ‘Christ is our hope’ (1Tim 1:1). All other elements and expectations find their place around Jesus. Christian hope is not a timetable of events, but *a person* in whom the purposes of God find their focus. The incarnation is the crisis of history within history, the *parousia* is the crisis that links history with the ‘age to come’. The personal return of Jesus is the central expectation of the thinkers and writers of the New Testament. This is the hope that inspire and energises the church.²

CREATIVE TENSION

Imminent yet delayed

At first reading the New Testament appears to be alive with the expectation that the *parousia* is imminent, ‘at the doors’ (Ja 5:9). Statements such as:³

- ‘When they persecute you in one town flee to the next ... you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes’ (Mt 10:23);
- ‘You know what hour it is ... wake from sleep ... salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed’ (Rm 13:11-12);
- ‘The appointed time is very short’ (1Cor 7:29);
- ‘The Lord is at hand’ (Phil 4:5);
- ‘The coming of the Lord is at hand’ (Jas 5:8).

Yet even within the pages of the New Testament, we see the early Christian community having to struggle with the accusation that the *parousia* will never actually come:

‘First of all you must understand this,
that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing,
following their own passions and saying,
"Where is the promise of his coming?
For ever since the fathers fell asleep,
all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation"
(2Pt 3:3-4)

² This topic of the *parousia* will be dealt with in considerable detail in the next section.

³ Compare also 1Pt 4:7; Heb 10:25; 1Jn 2:18; Rev 3:3; 22:20; etc



This issue continues to be real for many as the Christian community moves into its third millennium of waiting and working towards Jesus' *parousia*.

However, we must recognize that the Gospels and other Epistles also speak of the *parousia* being delayed (cf. Mt 24:48) and about its date being unknown to all but the Father (Acts 1:7). In Matthew 24 Jesus is speaking about the future and uses the phrase 'all this is but the beginning of birth pangs' (v8) suggesting a longer period of history (cf. also v14, 26, 36-39, 42-44 etc). While Romans 13 stresses the imminence of the *parousia*, the earlier chapters 9 to 11, which tell of God's purposes in relation to the Jews and Gentiles, suggest a longer period of history.

All this has of course lead some people to suggest that Jesus and the early church were mistaken in their expectations; but such an argument misunderstands the 'creative tension' that is a fundamental characteristic of the 'last days'. The pressure is due not to chronology but to the truth that since Jesus has come the *parousia* is pressing in upon us. Before discussing this further, let us examine the New Testament teaching about 'the signs of the times'.

Signs of the times

Towards the close of Jesus' ministry there is one last major discourse to the disciples on the subject of the 'end times' on the Mount of Olives. While each of the synoptic gospels (Mk 13; Mt 24; Lk 21) may have some different details, the main thrust is the same in each one. None of the passages are easy to interpret and some of them have problems that are far from easy to solve.

However, there appear to be two important 'keys' to help us to understand these passages. We find these keys at the beginning of Matthew 24 where Jesus' discourse is given with the Jerusalem Temple as a backcloth:

'Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the Temple. But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down." (Mt 24:1-2)

The disciples reply:

"Tell us, when will this be,
and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?"
(Mt 24:3)

The disciples, in asking this double question, clearly thought that they were asking about a single event in the future that sounded like the end of the world to them.

Jesus skillfully takes the two parts of their question and shows that in fact they unwittingly refer to different events.

- "*Tell us, when will this be?*" This first question refers to the events that will take place in the year 70 CE when the Romans would destroy both Jerusalem and the Temple.

- “What will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?” This second question refers to the *parousia*.

These gospel discourses (Mk 13; Mt 24; Lk 21) must be read from a ‘prophetic perspective’ in which near and distant chronological events overlay one eschatological event. The main aim of Jesus’ teaching here is to prepare the disciples (and subsequently the early Christian community in Judea) for the disaster that would break upon them as a consequence of the Jewish War in 70 CE. But also how this horrific event would be a sign of the kind of things that would happen throughout the ‘last days’.

Focusing on Mark 13 there appear to be four general features of the ‘last days’, which are ‘signs’ of God’s purposes being accomplished and the ‘end’ appearing:

- Deception and decline in religious faith (v5-6, 21-22);
- Wars and rumours of wars (v7-8);
- Worldwide witness and persecution of the church (v9-11);⁴
- Disturbances in the natural world (v8, 24-25).

In Paul’s writings there are other signs that complement these:

- Stress caused by selfish, antisocial behaviour (2Tim 3:1-4);
- Superficial and powerless spiritual life (2Tim 3:5);
- False teachers (already present), rebellion and the ‘man of lawlessness’ (2Tim 3:6-7; 2Th 2:3-8).

Beware! Be aware!

The presence of signs serves a very real purpose for the church as they live out their faith between ‘Pentecost’ and *parousia*. They are to create alertness and stimulus.

- **Beware!** History is littered with examples of people who have claimed to be able to calculate the *parousia* from ‘signs’ they claim to find in the biblical text, but events have always proved them wrong:
 - Jesus said, ‘The kingdom was not coming with signs to be observed’ (Lk 17:20); that means, ‘with the kind of signs that make calculation possible’;
 - Jesus said that no one apart from the Father knew the date of the *parousia* (Mk 13:32);
 - Attempts at calculation lead to pastoral problems; creating false hopes, false tensions and finally disillusion;

⁴ All martyrs killed from 33 - 2000CE: 69,420,000; Martyrs in the 20th century (1900-2000): 45,400,000; Martyrs since 1950: 13,300,000; Average annual martyrs since 1950: 278,000 per annum; Recent annual martyrs: 171,000 per annum;; Current annual martyrs: 160,000 per annum. See, for example, D. B. Barrett, G.T. Kurian and T. M. Johnson, World Christian Encyclopedia (Second edition; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) Vol. 1, p. 11. There is a weblink for the above, it is <<http://worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/>> The figures are disputed as exaggerated but nevertheless the scale of Christian martyrdom in the twentieth century is widely recognised.



- Calculations give some stimulus to evangelism, but not to the important tasks of social involvement;
 - When calculations lead to neglect in the work of God there is severe condemnation (Mt 24:45-51; 2Th 3:6-13).
- **Be aware!** Nevertheless, there are signs that Jesus gave to the church to raise awareness and alertness to what is happening throughout the 'last days':
- Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for not observing the 'signs' (Mt 16:1-3); they were not prepared to accept their implications;
 - The 'signs' are not markers for calculation, but indicators that God is in control of history and moving it according to his purposes; the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70 CE would have been both, a horror and something to grasp in faith, a sign fulfilled;
 - Remember that 'the last days' are the whole period between the incarnation and *parousia* (Heb 6:5; 1Cor 10:11; Acts 2:17), and the signs given are not the type that make calculation possible (e.g. earthquake, famine, political upheaval, etc); they are in fact characteristic of the whole period of the 'last days', recurring phenomena with possibly increasing intensity;
 - The difficult verse, '... this generation will not pass away before all these things take place' (Mk 13:30), almost certainly refers to 'the signs of the end' rather than to 'the end' itself; emphasizing that from the very beginning, each generation has witnessed these signs, and it will continue so until the end;
 - Notice in Mark 13 the recurring commands (unique in apocalyptic); 'Watch out' (v5, 9,33), 'Don't be troubled' (v7), 'Don't worry' (v11), 'Be on your guard' (v23), 'Keep awake' (v35,37).

Throughout, Jesus is encouraging watchfulness not speculation or calculation. The signs are to encourage faith. The very things that evoke fear in the hearts of the world become a 'means of grace' to us, inspiring faith. They have been described as 'hazard lights' that focus our attention. So the *parousia* remains always at, 'an hour at which you do not expect' (Mt 24:44). Throughout the New Testament there are two strands – the 'signs' and the 'sudden'; we can be absolutely certain that God is in control, but we never know when 'the end' itself will actually come. The tension never relaxes.

Work to be done

The delay in the *parousia* is pregnant with purpose. The intervening time is not for waiting but for working; and there is certainly much work to be done. It is to be a time of fulfillment. The *parousia* depends upon the inscrutable will of God and upon certain things happening:

- God moves to a different timescale from people; 'a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day' (2Pt 3:8; Ps 90:4);
- The delay is in fact a mark of God's grace towards humanity, because 'the Lord is not slow about his promise ... but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish' (2Pt 3:9).

We shall develop these ideas further below.



Presented with the creative tension of the imminence of the *parousia* and the necessary fulfillment of God's purposes, there is an exciting paradox. Each generation within the 'last days' appears to have the option to so express their devotion and faithfulness to God that they fulfill his purposes and hasten 'the coming of the Day of the God' (2Pt 3:12). The 'signs' show the ever-present readiness of the *parousia*. And yet, apart from this, God has also been sovereignly moving history towards his conclusion, knowing that his purposes will be fulfilled and that there will be a generation that will see the complete fulfillment of hope.

BASILEIA AND EKKLESIA

Crisis of confusion

One of the central problems which has plagued a Christian understanding of hope throughout the centuries has been the confusion over the nature and relationship between rule and role of God (*basileia*) within history and the cosmos and that of the church (*ekklesia*) within the world:

- "What is God doing?"
- "What should the church be doing?"

It is quite clear from the New Testament that these two questions are inseparably linked, and yet they of course bring different perspectives.

Basileia

Here is the sovereign, eternal and all embracing rule of God, in which all things have their origin, purpose and fulfillment. History is held within God's grasp, moving within 'this age' among the peoples and the nations of the world in a way that is beyond human understanding. While people have great freedom, and this allows the rebellion against God to continue and even grow, nevertheless God has everything under control. God will bring both human and satanic rebellion to an end. However, within this cosmic orbit of divine actions there move a people who have come under God's rule, who are harmonising with his purposes; they are 'the church'.

Ekklesia

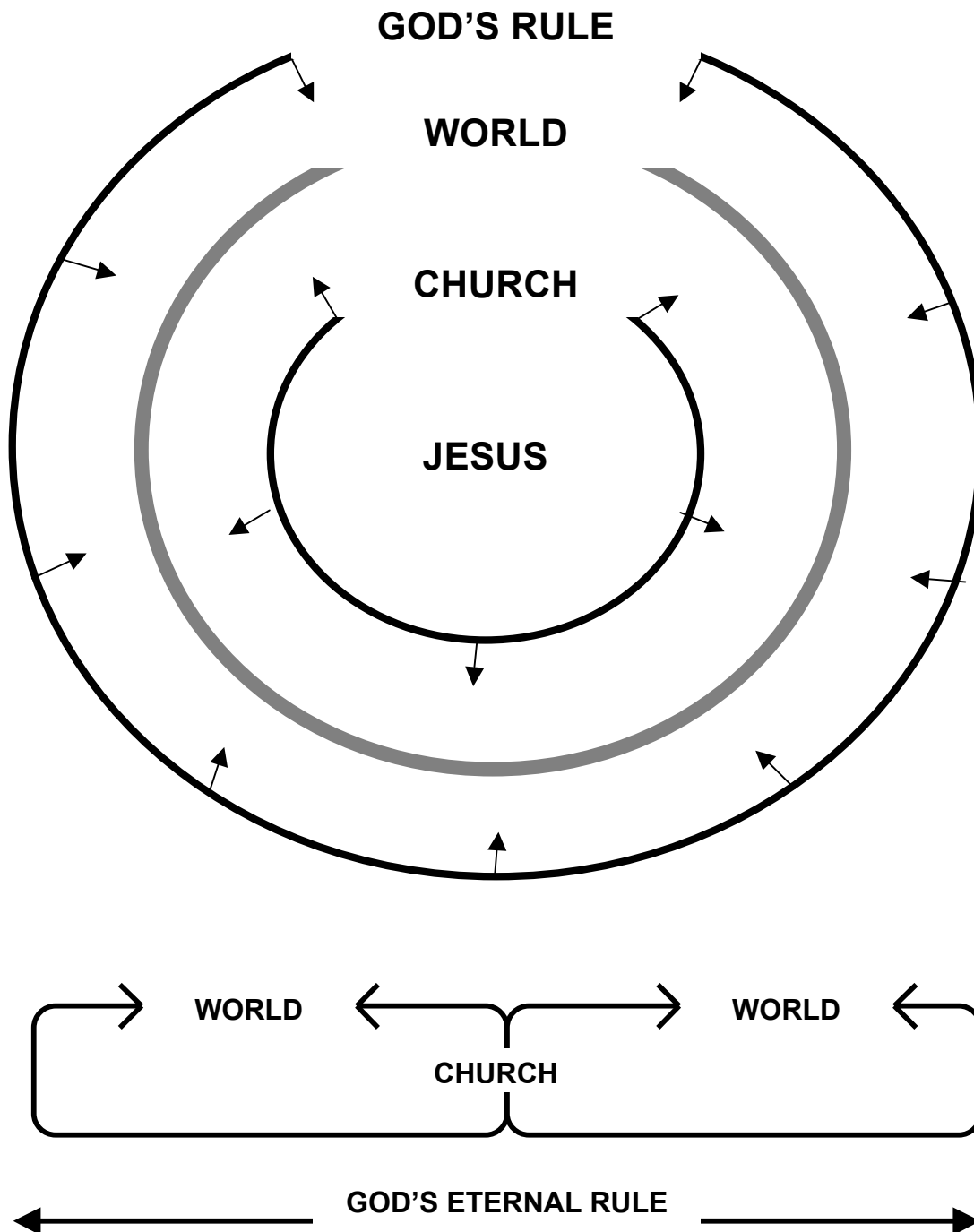
Here are the people, the church, the 'called-out ones', drawn from that world that stands in rebellion against God, and moving under God's rule. They exist because of the person of Jesus, whose death liberates them and whose resurrection life energises them, and who has commissioned them to fulfill God's purposes to the ends of the earth. Jesus is the personification of God's rule; through the Holy Spirit the church does the same. The church are the people who are the sign, the agents and the servants of God's rule and the unfolding hope.

Pincer movement

As God moves sovereignly and cosmically within history, and the church moves obediently and significantly within its cultures, the world is caught in the 'pincer movement'



that results. God maneuvers powerfully within the ebb and flow of history, while the church invades the fabric of society like salt and light. As the grip tightens the resistance from the world to both God and the church is heightened. As God's rule and the church's action touch the evil within the world, this evil is stimulated to hostile expression and a frenzy of resistance. As the cosmic purposes of God and the obedience of the church to God's will come to fulfillment, the result is 'flashpoint *parousia*' – the breaking-in of God and the end of the age.



DYNAMICS OF HOPE

We have said that certain things have to take place before the end comes, and we have seen that they are to do with 'God's rule', 'the church' and 'the world'; these are the three central elements of the 'end times'. While we cannot be certain about all the details the broad features are quite clear. Therefore let us examine in more detail the three main forces that are at work in the 'last days'.

Sovereignty of God

It is God who upholds history, not human endeavour nor mindless chance. It will come to God's planned conclusion; his purposes will not be frustrated (see Isa 40:9-17; 22-28; 42:10-17; 43:11-13; 45:5-7).

People must respond to God, and the final return of Jesus depends upon the commands, purposes and promises of God being fulfilled (cf. Acts 3:19-21).

We cannot predict God's ways; they cannot be reduced to human plan or scheme. God will not violate divine character, but other than that God will move freely and uninhibited (see Rm 11:33; Job 5:8-9; 11:7; etc).

Human beings cannot know when 'the end' will be, nor can we force God's hand. God's ways are quite unpredictable. God alone knows the times within which divine purposes are moving. God never runs out of time, nor controlled by it. God has all the time in the world! (cf. Mt 24:36; Mk 13:32-33; Acts 1:6-7; 17:26).

Two characteristics of God's sovereignty are 'patience' and 'grace'. Because time is on God's side the purpose is that 'all things' will be embraced by salvation. There is time, and free will cannot be violated (cf. 2Pet 3:8-10). The link between God's sovereignty and human freedom and responsibility is intertwined in mystery. People are free to choose either for or against God, and therefore bring about their own destiny. The possibility of choice exists only because of the grace of God. However God's desire is complete all-embracing salvation for everything.⁵

Church assertive and mature

The way in which the people of God live their lives (communally and individually), both in its intrinsic quality and the power and faithfulness with which they share the gospel and become involved with society, appears to have a direct bearing upon when 'the end will come'. The love of God, seen in salvation, leaves them 'no choice' but to proclaim it to the world (see 2Cor 5:11-15, NEB); the way they live will 'hasten in the day of the Lord' (2Pet 3:12).

⁵ We shall be examining the full implications of this challenge and the main arguments for and against it in our next section.

□ A light to the world

Jesus' parting command was to preach 'the good news' to the whole of creation (cf. Mk 16:15; Rev 5:13); to all nations (Mt 28:19-20); to the ends of the earth (Lk 24:47; Acts 1:8; cf. Rev 7:9-12). They were to infiltrate society and 'make disciples', bringing the rule of God into the lives of people from every tribe, people, tongue and nation. They were to fulfill the Hebrew vision of being a 'light to the nations'.

Fulfilling this command has the utmost 'end-time' significance. Jesus said, 'This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come' (Mt 24:14).

While this eschatological command has been, and must remain, a spur to Christian mission, it is not the sole condition upon which the *parousia* depends. The good news must be embraced, it must bring God's authority and quality of life to all who respond. It must have impact upon society and creation. It is not simply a matter of the quantity of proclamation.

We are to expect the 'last days' to be a time of outstanding fruitfulness, even though it will be in the face of crushing tribulation. God's Spirit is to be poured out on all flesh (Joel 2:28-32). The children of God are to be like the 'sand and stars' in number, to fulfill God's promise to Abraham. We are to expect increasing blessing as a result of preaching the gospel, and expect constant and unexpected initiatives by God.

□ A mature person ⁶

The New Testament is quite clear that the maturing of the people of God worldwide is also an 'end-time' task of great importance. The 'body of Christ' is to be built up; it is to come to 'fullness', a purity and stature that is wholly Christ-like (Eph 4:8-13).

This theme is taken up in a number of important scriptures:

- 'Establish your hearts unblamable in holiness ... at the coming of the Lord Jesus' (1Th 3:13; cf. 2:19);
- 'May the God of peace himself sanctify you holy ... kept sound and blameless at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ' (1Th 5:23);
- 'In order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him' (Col 1:22);
- 'That we may present everyone mature in Christ' (Col 1:28);
- 'To present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing' (Jude 24).

One of the most important New Testament images of the church is the 'Bride of Christ'. Our commitment to Jesus is our 'betrothal', and Paul saw his task to present the church as a 'pure bride to her one husband' (2Cor 11:2). Human marriage is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church; we are 'sanctified by his word' that we might

⁶ Link this section with the ideas about *epektasis* on p 10-11 above



be presented 'in splendour' without spot, wrinkle or blemish (Eph 5:26-27). In Revelation 21, John twice speaks of the church as 'a bride adorned for her husband' (v2), 'having the glory of God its radiance like a most rare jewel' (v11).

The subject of Christian perfection has been a matter for much painful controversy over the years. It is not easy to establish exactly what words like 'fullness', 'maturity' and 'purity' should be understood as meaning in reality. But this does not negate the fact that reaching this goal is a central 'end-time' theme. What is clear is that God has given the means by which it is to be accomplished (Eph 4:11-13; cf. Acts 20:18-27). We are promised that, 'he who calls you is faithful, and he will do it' (1Th 5:24). It must not lead to introspection; in fact the character that it takes to be those who can fulfill God's mission to the world is the very character that is required for 'fullness' and 'maturity'.

The Bridegroom will not come until the 'bride' is ready, and while it does 'not yet appear what we shall be, we know that when he appears we shall be like him', and this very hope purifies us (1Jn 3:2-3). The 'bride' of Revelation 21 is not the product of a sudden metamorphosis, but rather the result of steady preparation during 'the last days'. Holiness is an eschatological necessity that should ever spur us on.

STRUGGLE AND WITNESS

Tribulation

The third element of the 'end times' focuses on the struggle and tribulation faced within the world. 'Scripture leaves us in no doubt that, amid the days of expansion, maturity and unprecedented growth, the 'last days' will be a period of multiplying tension and conflict for the church. While demonic power has been broken (Jn 12:31; Heb 2:14), and the 'strong man has been bound' (Mt 12:29; Mk 3:27; Lk 11:21), Satan is using every means available to drag every soul possible into destruction with him. What is happening during the tribulation of the 'last days' is that:

- God is testing the quality of his people as a refining by fire;
- An opportunity to choose God is being presented to people; he does not wish to condemn anyone;
- Evil has the opportunity to bear its full fruit; to run its course, so that its judgment can be complete;
- Judgment begins to fall, already ahead of time, upon the children of darkness;
- Both light and darkness can be seen together, and each is revealed for what they really are.

Just as the human body reflects its inner spirit, so in the 'last days' human history and society reflect the spiritual conflict within, as they move towards the climax.

Tribulation will express itself in the 'signs of the times'; in economic disorder, social breakdown, rebellion, famine, plague and military conflict (cf. Rev 6:8-9, 16). There is a mixture of humanity producing this as the fruit of their rebellion against God, bringing judgment upon themselves; and God sovereignly working out his judgments.

□ Antichrist and tribulation

The church not only finds the tribulation creates a hostile environment, but also that it is directly attacked by it. This attack, which takes personified form, is referred to as 'the Antichrist'. This image is drawn together from several biblical ideas. Its roots are in the Jewish idea of a final human enemy of God and his people modeled on two figures in the Hebrew scriptures:

- **Antiochus Epiphanies**, who desecrated the Temple and persecuted the Jews, foreshadowed in Daniel 11:29-49;
- **The false prophet**, who would lead people into idolatry by deceptive teaching and miracles, anticipated in Deuteronomy 13:1-5.

These themes are picked up in the imagery of Revelation, where there are three figures:

- **The sea-beast**, a world ruler who blasphemes God and is worshipped by all except the elect (13:1-8) – represents political military power;
- **The land-beast**, a false prophet who does miracles and persuades people to make an image of the sea-beast and coerces them to worship it (13:11-18) – represents the deceptive power of state religion;
- **The harlot**, symbol of the world metropolis (Babylon) of trade and commerce – represents the enticements of economic affluence.

They are each empowered by the underlying evil force of the dragon (eg 13:4).

The letters of John are the only place where the reference to 'antichrist' is actually used (1Jn 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2Jn 7). He intriguingly says, "you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come" (1Jn 2:18), both future and present. A people / person inspired by 'the spirit of the antichrist' (1Jn 4:3) who denies Jesus came in the flesh (1Jn 2: 22; 2Jn 7).

The image is at its most graphic in the words of 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12:

Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming. The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Notice how this passage brings together all the elements we have already seen. This Antichrist image ('the lawless / sinful one') is full of subtlety; it is a religious figure claiming worship as supreme deity, but at the same time it is a political figure. It could be personified as an individual, but equally corporate or collective. It might threaten the church externally, but might equally be dangerous from within; it might be openly anti-Christian or secretly masquerading as a Christian. It has its roots back in the Hebrew scriptures but looks forward into the future. First and foremost it is a warning.

So the Antichrist idea appears to have been familiar to early Christians from its background and place in popular Jewish thinking; John and Paul simply draw on it, and possibly re-interpret it in their letters.

However, the image of the Antichrist speaks to every age of the church in the last days. As John's letters tell us it is a continuously present 'spirit' (1Jn 4:3) that remains into the future until 'the end'. It is hostile to the people of God in many and various ways; some overt, some insidious and intangible. It certainly manifests itself in individuals. It reminds us that until God finally breaks into history there will be ongoing and deepening evil in the world, subtle, powerful and devastating. The Antichrist idea warns and reminds us that history is not going to get better on its own accord; it has no hope without the in-breaking of God in Christ. The Antichrist is the 'seductive counterfeit of the kingdom of God.'⁷ It is a call to the church to both 'prophetic discernment'⁸ and a willingness to live and die as witnesses (or 'martyrs') to the truth as 'the end' approaches.

□ **Church and tribulation**

What is certain is that 'tribulation' is as much the inheritance of the Church as the life and the power of God:

- 'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you ... in the world you will have tribulation' (Jn 15:20; 16:2, 33);
- 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22).

We are a 'martyr' (witness) church and must expect both tribulation and satanic opposition (Mt 13:21; Rm 12:2, 12; 2Cor 11:14; 12:7; Eph 6:11-12; Col 1:13; 1Pt 5:8; etc). Our refusal to submit to the world and the 'spirit of Antichrist' will unleash fierce opposition (Mt 24:21; Rev 13:7). The climax of this tribulation will be so great that God will intervene to shorten the days and save his people (Mt 24:21-22). God will 'seal' his people and preserve them throughout the terrible conflict with satanic power (Rev 7:1-8; 9:4).

Two key themes work themselves out within the church during the 'last days':

- **'Overcoming'**: what is required of the individual and the church is that they 'overcome' in God's power, but as an act of their own will, 'he that endures to the end shall be saved' (Mt 10:22; Mk 13:13); overcoming is the supreme quality of the child of God in the 'end times', it is also the nature of their God (see Rev 2:7, 11, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 19:11-16), to them is given the supreme reward (Rev 7:14; 12:11; 21:7).

⁷ See 'Hope Against Hope' R Bauckham & T Hart, pub Darton, Longman & Todd 1999 p 115-116

⁸ As above.



- **'Martyrdom'**:⁹ many overcomers must die for their faith; this recurs throughout the 'last days', but there is a limit to the number of martyrs who must die before the final judgment (cf. Rev 6:9-11); yet they have special honour, and like 'the Lamb' their death has creative power; so martyrdom has clear 'end-time' significance.

As the glory of God shines brighter within God's people, so the satanic opposition intensifies, but under God's sovereign control, when the moment is right, 'then the end will come'.

Hallmarks of hope

The characteristics of God's people during the 'last days' must be:

- **Confidence** – faith and certainty
- **Watchfulness** – never taken by surprise
- **Action** – growth, fruitfulness
- **Holiness** – adorning the character of God
- **Love** – sacrificial giving of oneself
- **Prayer** – 'your kingdom come!'
- **Joy** – praise, worship
- ... and of course **Hope!**

Questions and Reflections

1. What difficulties do you see the 'delay' in the *parousia* creating among the Christians you know? What should we be doing and saying to address these difficulties?
2. How ought the church to live in the days between the times?
3. New Testament phrases like 'living in the last days' and 'hastening in the coming of the Lord' highlight the tension for Christians of living with 'the already and the not yet'. The biblical texts suggest that this should be a creative tension full of possibility and significance. What could Christians as individuals and communities of faith do, in real terms, to give real meaning to this experience? What should 'living eschatologically' actually mean in practice?

Reading and Resources

Key books:

R Bauckham & T Hart '**Hope Against Hope**' Darton, Longman & Todd 1999

JB Green (Ed *et al*) '**Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels**' IVP 1992: article: 'Kingdom of God' / Heaven by CC Caragounis p 417-430

⁹ The word 'martyrdom' comes from the Gk *marturia* that means 'witness'. Its use certainly does not demand that the person has actually been killed for their faith, though in Revelation it usually does.



G MacDonald *'The Evangelical Universalist'* SPCK 2008
NT Wright *'New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of the Christian Hope'*
Grove Books 1999
NT Wright *'The Resurrection of the Son of God'* SPCK 2003
P Yoder *'Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice & Peace'* Life & Faith Press
1987

Other useful book resources:

J Alison *'Living in the End Times'* SPCK 1997
CE Armerding & WW Gasque (Ed) *'Handbook of Biblical Prophecy'* Baker 1977
W Barclay *'A Spiritual Autobiography'* Eerdmans Publishing Company 1977
R Bauckham *'Jude & 2 Peter'* Word 1983
R Bauckham *'The Theology of the Book of Revelation'* Cambridge 1993
GR Beasley-Murray *'The Book of Revelation'* Eerdmans 1981
J Bonda *'The One Purpose of God'* Eerdmans 1993
W Brueggemann *'Peace: Understanding Biblical Themes'* Chalice Press 2001
F Carey (Ed) *'The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come'* British Museum
Press 1999
RG Close *'The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views'* IVP 1977
N Cohn *'The Pursuit of the Millennium'* Temple Smith 1970
DN Freedman (Ed) *'Anchor Bible Dictionary' Vol:3* Doubleday 1992 see article T
Prendergast 'Hope' p 284
DN Freedman (Ed) *'Anchor Bible Dictionary' Vol:5* Doubleday 1992 see articles:

- Eschatology by DL Petersen p 575
- *Parousia* by Christopher Rowland p xxx

JB Green [Ed et al] *'Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels'* IVP 1992: articles:

- Apocalyptic by DC Allison
- Eschatology by DC Allison Jr p 206-209
- Son of Man by IH Marshall p 775-781

G Kittel (Ed) *'Theological Dictionary of the New Testament'* Eerdmans 1964: article
basileus by KL Schmidt [et al] Vol 1: p 564-593
AT Lincoln *'Paradise Now and Not Yet'* Cambridge 1981
D Linn 'Good Goats – Healing our Image of God' Paultist Press
BD McLaren *'The Secret Message of Jesus'* Thomas Nelson 2006
RH Mounce *'The Book of Revelation'* Eerdmans 1977
R Parry & C Partridge (Eds) *'Universal Salvation?'* Paternoster 2003
A Richardson (Ed) *'A Theological Word Book of the Bible'* see article 'Hope' London
SCM Press 1965 p 108-109
The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, *'The Mystery of Salvation'* London,
Church House Publishing, 1995
D Thompson *'The End of Time'* Minerva 1997
Walter Wink *'Engaging the Powers'* Fortress Press 1992
NT Wright *'The New Testament and the People of God'* SPCK 1992
NT Wright *'Jesus and the Victory of God'* SPCK 1996
NT Wright *'Surprised by Hope'* SPCK 2007
PB Yoder & WM Swartley (Ed) *'The Meaning of Peace'* (2nd Ed) IMS Elkhart 2001

