

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

Having looked at how Christ's resurrection and his kingship influenced the first believers, both in their confrontation of sinners with the gospel and their own progressive sanctification, I turn, finally, to the part played in the 'blessed hope' of the first believers by Christ's resurrection and kingship.¹ When talking about what was the believer's hope, we are, of course, not talking about the believer's wishful thinking, but his certainty, his confident expectation, his assurance.

What is this hope, this confident anticipation which believers have in, through and despite all the changing circumstances of life, including persecution, and, in the ultimate, death? The believers' 'blessed hope' is the return of Christ as King and their resurrection leading to their entrance into his kingdom; as the apostle so clearly stated, it is:

...the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ (Tit. 2:13).

The Believer's Hope in Persecution

I turn, first of all, to the believer's comfort in persecution (which surely covers the believer's comfort in all kinds of affliction). Scripture is clear:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven (Matt. 5:10-12).

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him (Jas. 1:12).

¹ For a discourse I preached when writing this present work, see my 'Looking Forward – To What?' on my sermonaudio.com page and YouTube.

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death (Rev. 2:9-11).

What is the believer's comfort in trial? The reward, the crown, the recognition that is already prepared for him in heaven. But we need to pause at this point. We must be clear about this mention of 'in heaven'. True, believers' rewards are already reserved for them in heaven (Matt. 5:12; 6:19-23; 19:21; Luke 12:33-34; 18:22; 1 Pet. 1:4), but when do they receive them? In the intermediate state? No! At the appearance of Christ the King, and their resurrection to the last judgment; that is the final day, the reckoning day:

For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done (Matt. 16:27).

[God] commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).

Each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire (1 Cor. 3:13-15).

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil (2 Cor. 5:10).

For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? (1 Thess. 2:19).

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:23).

Your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring... is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering – since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus... Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him... (2 Thess. 1:4-8; 2:1).

Keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time – he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of Lords (1 Tim. 6:14-15).

Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing (2 Tim. 4:8).

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door (Jas. 5:7-9).

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation (1 Pet. 2:12).

And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Pet. 5:4).

I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown (Rev. 3:11).

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done (Rev. 20:1-13).

Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done (Rev. 22:12).

This is not the end of the scriptures which show that believers' hope in face of trial and persecution lies in their resurrection at the return of Christ, and their entrance into his eternal kingdom, the eternal age:

Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life (Mark 10:29-30).

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you (1 Pet. 4:12-14).

Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Rev. 3:10-13).

Clearly, the 'blessed hope' which encouraged the first believers in face of inevitable affliction and trial was Christ's return, their

resurrection and subsequent entrance into the Saviour's kingdom.

The Believer's Hope in Death

Now for the ultimate issue – death. What is the ‘blessed hope’, the confident anticipation which believers have in facing death, their final enemy (1 Cor. 15:26)? Judging by the way many funeral hymns and sermons seem to major on it, in facing bereavement and death most believers find comfort in the ‘blessed hope’ of a glorious intermediate state; that is to say, the thought that the believer, at death, immediately enters heaven to enjoy the full experience of eternal glory with Christ, linked with reunion with previously-deceased fellow-believers, especially loved-relations.² This, for many believers, is what constitutes their comfort and consolation. Indeed, graveyards are packed with headstones carved with such an assurance.

But, while Scripture does teach that a believer is always ‘with Christ’, in life, through death, and after death (Rom. 14:9; Heb. 13:5-6), the believer’s ‘blessed hope’ – according to Scripture – is not the intermediate state, but Christ’s coming again, with the believer’s resurrection into Christ’s kingdom, all depending on Christ’s own resurrection.³

² These verses need to be pondered: ‘No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man’ (John 3:13). ‘David... both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day... David did not ascend into the heavens’ (Acts 2:29,34). ‘Whom have I in heaven but you?’ (Ps. 73:25).

³ One of the grievous aspects of the post-millennialism I referred to in the Introduction (see also Appendix 1) is that those who hold that view are looking forward to the fulfilment of a hope before Christ’s return. In their view, the kingdom will come in indescribable joy *before* Christ returns: his coming will, in effect, interrupt that joy in order to reinstate it! This dream is based, not on any plain scripture which addresses believers, but on a theological or prophetic scheme. The title of the leading contemporary Reformed book advocating such a kingdom, and which has powerfully affected writers like Sarah James, for instance – *The Puritan Hope* by Iain Murray – gives the game away. Such a kingdom may have been the hope of many puritans, but that cannot be

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

Again, we must never forget or ignore the big picture. Ever since Adam's fall, creation – including and especially man – has been cursed, cursed by God as a result of sin. First, God addressed the serpent:

Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

Then the woman:

I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.

And finally, Adam:

Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you: 'You shall not eat of it', cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return' (Gen. 3:14-19).

Indeed, disorder, confusion and division became the order of the day, following God's curse on the world at Babel (Gen. 11:1-9).

But God always intended to renew the fallen and ruined creation:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to [or in or upon] us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to

decisive: Does Scripture refer to such a kingdom when it speaks of the believer's 'blessed hope'? Which apostle wrote of it? For those who might suggest Paul in Rom. 9–11, see my *Romans 11*. As everybody knows, the puritans had to come to terms with defeat, and the dashing of so many of their hopes. See my *Battle*.

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Rom. 8:18-25).

Paul, writing to the Ephesians, spoke of it:

...the mystery of [God's] will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph. 1:9-10).

Peter, too:

The heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly... The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed [destroyed]... The heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:7,10,12-13).

And John could declare:

I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more... God... will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away (Rev. 21:1-4).⁴

⁴ 'The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

While not for a moment suggesting that the following verses speak of universal redemption, even so they do indicate Christ's redemptive work will lead to a gloriously positive end for all creation. Take, for instance, Peter's assertion concerning:

...Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago (Acts 3:20-21).

And Paul could speak of the time:

...when all things are [that is, will be] subjected to him [that is, Christ]... (1 Cor. 15:28).

...the power that enables him [that is, the Lord Jesus Christ] even to subject all things to himself (Phil. 3:21).

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Col. 1:15-20).

And believers are the glorious forerunners of this new creation – as James reminded his readers:

Of his own will [the Father] brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures (Jas. 1:18).

like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea' (Isa. 11:6-9). "The wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain", says the LORD' (Isa. 65:25).

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

This is the big picture. And Scripture places the believer's hope securely within this overall plan of God. Let me prove it.

I start with what I have already called⁵ the principal passage:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you – unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures... So we preach and so you believed.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death...

Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptised on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised on their behalf? Why are we in danger every hour? I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! What do I gain if, humanly

⁵ I quote this passage again to make sure the point is driven home.

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised: 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'...

...the resurrection of the dead... What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written: 'The first man Adam became a living being', the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?'

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:1-58).

What is the believer's hope, the believer's consolation at the graveside of a fellow-believer, and his assurance in facing his own death? Is it the intermediate state? It is not! It is the resurrection of Christ and hence the believer's own resurrection with all the saints at the last day! Indeed, as the extract proves, the very act of burial confidently proclaims – and proclaims in the utmost clarity – the sowing of a seed, knowing that it will perish in the ground, but, in due time, will lead to the arising of

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

a glorious new life. Christ promulgated this truth just before his own death:

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:23-24).⁶

This expectation is encapsulated in Christ's ringing assertion at the grave of Lazarus: 'He shall rise again' (John 11:23). And it is this that should give every believer comfort at the death of a fellow-believer – and when they come to their own experience of grappling with the last dread enemy (1 Cor. 15:26,54-55; Heb. 2:14-15).

But even that does not plumb the depths of Christ's words. As Charles Ellicott commented:

[Martha] has spoken of the resurrection as a truth which she believes, and as an event in the far-off future, so remote from the present life indeed, as to be powerless to comfort her now ['I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day' (John 11:24)]. The two first words of [Christ's] answer, expressed in the fullness of emphasis, teach her that the resurrection is to be thought of as his person, and that it is to be thought of as actually present. 'I – his words mean – 'and none beside me, am the resurrection. I am the resurrection – a present life, and not simply a life in the remoteness of the last day'. In the same sense in which he has declared himself to be the water of life and the bread of life, supplying in himself every need of spiritual thirst and spiritual hunger, he declares himself to be the resurrection, revealing in his own person all that men had ever thought and hoped of a future life, being himself the power which shall raise them at the last day, and

⁶ This principle is one of the main reasons why I oppose cremation; at a stroke, it grievously obliterates the most important spiritual lesson to be learned from the burial of a cadaver in the earth: sowing a seed to produce new life. Cremation, it seems to me, marks the atheist's desire, at all costs, to get rid of any thought of God wherever he can: destroy the body; whatever the Bible promises, that body cannot rise! But, of course, it will!

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

could therefore raise them now. This is because he is also 'the life'.

In other words, the resurrection is not simply an event at the end of time; it is not a mantra or slogan to be repeated as some sort of catechism. Martha, it seems, had got no further than that. Resurrection at Christ's appearing, of course, marks the end of time, but the resurrection, in a spiritual sense, is here and now for those in Christ. Moreover, Christ does not say: 'I will raise...', but: 'I – I myself – am the resurrection'. And all those who are in the new covenant are in union with Christ by faith, and raised with him spiritually, even now. This, it goes without saying, does not detract in the slightest from the believer's physical resurrection at the last day. Rather, it provides yet another link between the believer's 'blessed hope' and his present life in Christ: he is raised to newness of life in the Spirit, even now.

This, then, is the believer's hope, his 'blessed hope' – 'the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ' (Tit. 2:13); in other words, the believer's 'blessed hope' is the thought of his glorious resurrection at the coming of Christ. It is not his happiness in anticipating the intermediate state: that is, his bliss after death and before the resurrection.

Consider another passage, a passage of huge significance in this matter. If ever there was a time and place for an apostle to reassure believers, anxious about their believing dead, by telling them about the present blessed state of those who had died trusting Christ, it must have been when Paul was writing to the saints at Thessalonica, dealing with this very issue:

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep [that is, those believers who have died], that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

Paul's silence about the intermediate state, when writing to these anxious believers in Thessalonica, knocks Sherlock Holmes' 'curious incident' on Dartmoor into a cocked hat.⁷

Why! the Thessalonians' concern would not arise today; I have never met a believer who was worried that some believing loved-one who had died might be overlooked when Christ returns. After all, the vast majority of believers are convinced that the loved-one in question is already enjoying glory with Christ even now – so how could he or she be overlooked? But the Thessalonians *were* in agony over this very point. Why?

But let us not leave it in the negative. Do not miss the positive confidence in these words:

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words

Indeed, there is no shortage of scriptural testimony to show that the believer's hope is the return of Christ, the resurrection, and the transformation of the believer's mortal body into an immortal body at the last day, leading to eternal bliss in Christ's kingdom. As the writer to the Hebrews said: 'Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come' (Heb. 11:14).

⁷ See Conan Doyle's *The Adventure of Silver Blaze*.

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

This, of course, is just as it was with Abraham and his fellow-believers spoken of in Hebrews 11:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God... These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city (Heb. 11:8-16).

And when will that city come? At the return of Christ!

What is it, specifically, about the believer's resurrection that makes it the time of his 'blessed hope'? Surely, it must be that it marks his entrance into Christ's kingdom in all its fullness. True, right from his conversion – his regeneration leading to saving repentance towards God and trust in Christ – the child of God has been in the kingdom. Indeed, right from eternity, in God's decree, it has been so. But it is only with his resurrection at Christ's return that the believer will enjoy to the full the realities and glories of that everlasting kingdom. It is only then that the believer will receive his resurrected body (John 5:25,28; 11:24; 1 Cor. 15:22-23; Phil. 3:20-21), enabling him to enjoy the new heavens and the new earth.⁸

⁸ An objection: Doesn't 2 Cor. 5:1-10 teach that at death the believer is clothed with his new body? I think not. As Paul states: 'We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord' (2 Cor. 5:6-8). To be with Christ (in the intermediate state) is to be 'absent from the body' – which is decomposing in the earth. Moreover, we know

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

So much for the believer's 'blessed hope'.

* * *

I do not wish to give the impression that these things exist in watertight compartments. The believer's progressive sanctification, his 'blessed hope' and his life in the *ekklēsia* are all bound together in Christ, in his death, resurrection and return.

In dealing with the spiritual union of Christ and his people, Emil Brunner set out the unbreakable link between Christ's death and his resurrection:

that the believer receives his resurrected body at the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:35-57). Ellicott: 'The answer to that question [that is, the question I am dealing with] is found in the manifest fact that the intermediate state occupied but a subordinate position in... Paul's thoughts... He did not speculate accordingly about that [intermediate] state, but was content to rest in the belief that when absent from the body he would, in some more immediate sense, be present with the Lord. But the longing of his soul was... that the Lord might come quickly – that he might put on the new and glorious body'. Gill: '...which is meant not the glorified body in the resurrection morn; for though the bodies of the saints will be glorious, incorruptible, powerful, and spiritual, they are not said to be celestial, nor will they be from heaven, but be raised out of the earth'. Calvin, while he was not absolutely certain, showed where he planted his feet: 'The body, such as we now have it, [Paul] calls a house of tabernacle For as tabernacles are constructed for a temporary purpose of slight materials, and without any firm foundation, and then shortly afterwards are thrown down, or fall of their own accord, so the mortal body is given to men as a frail hut, to be inhabited by them for a few days... 2 Pet. 1:13; Job 4:19... a house of clay. [The apostle] places in contrast with this a building of perpetual duration. It is not certain whether he means by this term a state of blessed immortality, which awaits believers after death, or the incorruptible and glorious body, such as it will be after the resurrection. In whichever of these senses it is taken, it will not be unsuitable; though I prefer to understand it as meaning that the blessed condition of the soul after death is the commencement of this building, and the glory of the final resurrection is the consummation of it'.

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

The fellowship of Jesus discloses a paradoxical unity of terms which elsewhere are incompatible. It is a spiritual⁹ unity of visible earthly persons with an unseen, heavenly, and yet present person, their Head... the eternal ever-present Christ... This invisible Christ, the Lord, is in fact no other than he whom the... apostles... had known in the flesh as the rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, with whom they had eaten and walked in bodily fellowship, who had been amongst them in his physical presence on the last evening of his life and who on the day following had been crucified. And his death upon the cross was a very real and tangible fact of history... It was not something which now lived forever behind them as though it had been revoked by the subsequent fact of the resurrection: much rather, the fact of his having been crucified was the saving fact itself upon which all their faith was founded. Only in the unity of the cross and the resurrection was the life of faith possible as a being crucified with Christ, and at the same time a sharing in his triumphant life.

But, as the first believers found, it was only after their conversion that they began to grasp this amazing fact:

Not until they had risen with him in their hearts did they apprehend within themselves his... spiritual presence¹⁰... which lives entirely in the life of a historical, never-to-be-repeated occurrence and is actually identical with this occurrence... (Gal. 2:20).

Brunner moved from the past and present to the future:

This community [that is, the *ekklēsia*] knows itself to be not only bound up with the saving history of the past, rooted in it and living in it, but also essentially looking forward to a salvation which is yet to come. The *ekklēsia* as the fellowship of the Messiah is itself messianic: its existence can be properly described only by using the categories of eschatology, or expectation of a transcendent consummation. This consummation has dawned with Jesus; in his incarnate life it has already begun... The kingdom of God has come (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20); the rule of God for which all are looking is

⁹ Original 'mystical'. This applies throughout these extracts from Brunner.

¹⁰ Original 'so-called mystical presence'.

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

already among you, for he the transcendent eternal Messiah is already in their midst (Luke 17:21; Matt. 18:20). But as yet it was a concealed presence. Only with the resurrection did the veil begin to be withdrawn. His presence among them as the risen one is a transcendent happening, 'realised eschatology'...

The new age has now dawned. And yet, at the same time, it remains unfulfilled; in its plenitude it has still to be awaited. This expectation of the future consummation as distinguished from the salvation which has already been realised cannot be dismissed as a more or less ancillary element in the life of the Christian community; it is the very breath of its life...

To live in this hope, in this tense expectation of the transcendent goal, and from that standpoint to view this here-and-now as a preliminary – that is precisely the fundamental character of the community's life. They 'have, as though they had not' (1 Cor. 7:29f). And further: precisely this forward-looking attitude is identical with what they term the gift of the Holy Ghost. For he, the Holy Ghost, is the very life of the new age. *He* is the 'realised eschatology'. For they qualify the gift of the Holy Spirit as the first-fruits, the earnest, the Pledge of the future. To be in the Spirit and to live in this expectation are one and the same thing. Therefore they know that their material life on earth, in this sinful body, subjected to the sinful ordinances of this world and chained to the body of this death, is a not-yet-having. They are therefore pilgrims on earth; they know that this earthly life is but a provisional dispensation which will not be transformed into the finality of eternal heavenly life until the Lord comes again in glory.

They walk as yet 'by faith, not by sight' (2 Cor. 5:7)...

Everywhere it is implied that the new life is a life on the threshold, and everywhere it is just the possession of the Holy Spirit which determines and characterises that life on the threshold.

The spiritual is the eschatological and the eschatological is spiritual.

Brunner was clear as to the connection between the rise of the institution of the Church (that is, Christendom) and the decline of the believers' expectation of Christ's return and the kingdom:

The tendency to exalt the [ecclesiastical] office as such could not arise as long as men's hearts and hopes were set upon the future, and in consequence the present dispensation regarded as provisional merely. The emergence of ecclesiastical rule and

Use 3: The Believer's Hope

jurisdiction is coincident with the loss or weakening of the community's messianic consciousness. Both the pneumatic and the messianic factors work in the same direction. As long as they are sufficiently alive, they prevent and render superfluous all institutional consolidation. The community which waits in hope for the return of the Lord, and which lives by faith and love in the possession of his Spirit, cannot be an institution, a church.¹¹

¹¹ Emil Brunner: *The Misunderstanding of the Church*, Lutterworth Press, London, 1952, pp55-59, emphasis original..