

STUDY 3

The Church Has Always Been Eschatological

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We may say that the church today is popularly viewed as an institution and it exists for the present, perhaps with a hope of something better in the after life. While we say that the church has always been eschatological, we may ask, ‘has the church always lived eschatologically?’ To put the proposition in a question form may imply that there is something that the church can do to position herself in an eschatological mode. Is that true? Perhaps to ask the question is to enquire whether the church has been gripped by the vision of the *eschaton* or living in the *eschaton*. In other words, is the church focused on the *eschaton* or is she focused on the institutional structures and existing for the present? In whatever ways we view the relevance or appropriateness of the question, it is a necessary question as the church lives in this period of the *eschaton*. To ask the question is to say that the church is aware of the tension that exists in the *eschaton*. The answer would also depend on our understanding of the terms ‘church’ and ‘eschatology’. We need to understand these terms in the biblical context.

Before we move on, we need to ask another question. Why is the topic relating to eschatology put at the early part of the school? The reason for the question is this: The Greek word, *eschatos*, means last or final. But the *eschaton* is not that which is yet to come. We are in it. It is the present. It is the substance of our hope and constitutes the basis of our faith and we had better know about it early rather than late.¹ Knowing this enables us to cope with the tension that is so much a part of this period. We have often thought of eschatology as that which deals with the closing of time, that is, God’s time. We think of the end time as a period that is to come. Furthermore in theological discussion, we talk of the things of God in linear time as in salvation history. In those discussions, as we move toward the end, then we consider eschatology. But should we be thinking of those issues in a linear time frame?

The term ‘church’ is simple enough as we all well know. It translates the Greek term, *ekklesia*, which means the called out assembly. The church is the called out people of God who are incorporated into the body of her Saviour, Jesus Christ. We are not using the term with reference to the hierarchical and denominational structures as is popularly understood today.

¹ Not only early in the program of this School, but also early in life.

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Eschatology is the study of the last things—heaven and hell and judgement. While we may understand these last things as yet to come, the scripture takes a different line. The last days began two thousand years ago with the incarnation of the Son of God as the writer to the Hebrews tells us, and we are still in it:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets,² but in these last [*eschaton*] days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds (Heb. 1:1–2).²

The last days began two thousand years ago. The writer to the Hebrews was living in the last days. God has been speaking to His people throughout history. He did that by signs and wonders, and by the words spoken through the prophets. The writer to the Hebrews was well aware of the revelation of God through His word. However, the word now comes not just in speech but by a person, the Son of God. The *eschaton* was ushered in through a person. Thus the *eschaton* has already begun, from the incarnation of Jesus, and we are in this period of time, or rather, we are in this person of Christ. The *eschaton* and the person of Christ are inextricably linked.³ The writer to the Hebrews further added that the Son of God who ushered in the *eschaton* is also the Creator. By adding this last clause here, he is implying that the *eschaton* is indeed the plan of God from creation.

Revelation spoke of the eschatological word coming from the Son of Man:

Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands,¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest.¹⁴ His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire,¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters.¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force (Rev. 1:12–16).

PENTECOST—AN ESCHATOLOGICAL EVENT

When Peter got up to speak on the Day of Pentecost, he quoted from the prophet Joel (2:28–29) to explain what was happening. The Spirit had come upon His people as God declares that ‘in the last days I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh’ (Acts 2:17). Joel had prophesied that the Spirit would be poured out on all flesh in the last days, so the coming of the Spirit onto all people on the Day of Pentecost was declared by Peter to be an event belonging to the ‘last days’. This has to be the case since the last days began with the coming of the Son of God. The Spirit, being the other advocate (*paracletos*), has now come and is set loose (poured out) on the people of God on whom the process of restoration has begun. This means that the events of the book of Acts and indeed the whole of the New Testament need to be interpreted eschatologically.

² Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

³ The relation of Christ to the *eschaton* is well discussed in A. Konig, *The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology* (NCTM, Blackwood, 1999), pp. 32–63.

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THE GOSPELS AND THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

The New Testament begins with the incarnation of the Son of God, the Creator and the one who brings in the last period of God's history to its fulfillment. The era of relating in time-honoured and culturally accepted ways has come to a close with the ushering in of the Kingdom of God through the Son. He, who is also Creator, is the one who has control of the forces of nature and will restore humanity from its decadence. He will energise the human spirit from within in this new era. That is to view the works of Jesus eschatologically. The work of Jesus on earth is not a template on which we use to work out the turbulence in the present life. The signs and wonders wrought by Jesus need to be seen as the expression of the glory of God rather than works serving the needs of humanity. That is the way to understand these wonders in the light of the *eschaton*.

The Acts of the Apostles highlights the happenings of the eschatological church. Again the events are not examples to follow. They are the result of the dynamic indwelling of the Spirit of God. The present day church always has a nostalgic feeling about the early church and longs for a return to the kind of life in that state. Those events may or may not occur again, but the dynamic indwelling of the Spirit will work within the people of God resulting in new activities and new ways in this last era. That is the new dynamics of the *eschaton*.

THE CHANGING TIMES

Paul talks of the changing times in his epistles. One of these passages comes from Ephesians:

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision'—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—¹² remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:11–13).

The 'then' and 'now' are contrasted by Paul—'uncircumcision' with 'circumcision', 'without Christ' with 'in Christ', 'far off' with 'near', and 'no hope' with 'covenants of promise'. In this new era which has been ushered in by Christ, the Spirit energises the believers from within them and makes real the promise that is only found in Christ. The old cultural division between the Gentiles and the Jews has been broken down and there is now only one new people in Christ. We are in this new era.

Why has the church to be eschatological? It is because the *eschaton* begins with the Son of God and the church is the body of the Son of God. Barth commented:

If Christianity be not altogether thoroughgoing eschatology, there remains in it no relationship whatever with Christ.⁴

⁴ K Barth, tr. E. C. Hoskyns, *The Epistle to the Romans* (OUP, London, 1933), p. 314.

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THE 'ALREADY' AND THE 'NOT YET'

In this present period of the *eschaton*, the Kingdom of God is a present reality, but there is also a coming fulfillment. We live in the 'already' (this age into which the Kingdom has broken) and the 'not yet' (the age to come) as Jesus told Peter:

Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.'²⁹ Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first' (Mark 10:28–31).

Elements of this 'already' and 'not yet' are also present in Paul's letters. He wrote to the Colossians (2:6) since they 'have received Christ Jesus the Lord [the 'already'], continue to live your lives in him [the 'not yet']'. This tension may also be seen as the indicative (of the 'already') and the imperative (of the 'not yet').⁵ Examples of this are seen in the verses below:

... for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God [*indicative*] ...⁵ Put to death [*imperative*], therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry) (Col. 3:3–5).

So if you have been raised with Christ [*indicative*], seek [*imperative*] the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God (Col. 3:1).

The categories of the indicative and the imperative above are put in a simplistic way. It does not reflect the true nature of things. However, this allows us to get a handle on the issues involved. The categories of the indicative and imperative or the 'already' and 'not yet' are not separate categories. They need to be viewed as one and the same thing. The 'not yet' is guaranteed by the 'already' and is 'marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit' (Eph. 1:13). The imperative does not precede the indicative, but is propelled by the indicative and dependent on it.⁶ The indicative without the imperative moves towards Gnosticism and the imperative without the indicative moves towards legalism.⁷ It is humanity trying to reach out to the heavens.

So has the church been eschatological? There is a present reality of the *eschaton*, but there is also a future fulfillment. In Revelation 7 and 21, we get a glimpse of what is to come. There is the Lamb on the throne and the people of all nations gathered around Him in perfect harmony. The dwelling of God is with His people (Rev. 21:3). There is also the imagery of the new Jerusalem prepared as a bride for her husband, Christ, the fulfillment of the 'not yet':

Then 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.² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Rev. 21:1–2).

⁵ H. Ridderbos, *Paul, An Outline of His Theology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1975, pp. 253ff.

⁶ Ridderbos. pp. 253ff.

⁷ F. W. Danker, *The Kingdom in Action*, Concordia Publishing House, St Louis, 1965, pp. 95–6.

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The redemption of humanity has this as the final outcome. This is the closest and the most intimate of human relationships that we know. This is the imagery of the oneness of humanity and her Creator, and the Father is moving the whole of creation towards this end.

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION OR THE TRANSFORMATION IN THE *ESCHATON*

Having got a glimpse of the ‘not yet’, we live in the period between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’. There must be the process of moving us from the ‘already’ to the ‘not yet’. That is the transformation that we need. That is why Paul wrote, ‘As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him’ (Col. 2:6).

History needs to be interpreted through the lens of eschatology. Its meaning is only understood when we see history moving towards the *eschaton*. That is the real meaning of history because Christ, the true image of God, has ushered in the Kingdom of God and its fulfillment has already been accomplished in Him. We are ‘being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit’ (2 Cor. 3:18). Therefore to think that we can legislate to effect this transformation is an error for this transformation ‘comes from the Lord, the Spirit’. We often strive to fulfill the imperatives of the scriptures as if we are able to effect this transformation ourselves. We think that this transformation can come from within us as if it is possible for this to take place outside of Christ. As the *eschaton* has been fulfilled by Christ, the indicatives inform us that we are in the triune communion. We participate in the triune communion and this is to participate in the eventual reality. The reality of our participation in the triune communion is reflected in the present by our participation in one another, that is, in the community of faith, the body of Christ.

When we lose sight of the *eschaton* and the fulfillment that has already taken place in Christ, then we will be preoccupied with the present and all its concerns. We will then be focused on the immediate future and to ensure that it will be well for us. Our present day thinking deceives us into believing that we are able to control the future and the elements of nature. The world is talking of our preferred future in a deterministic way. It is really a ‘tower of Babel’ mentality. How much of the future can we really control—earthquake, tsunami, weather conditions, and so forth?

Many facets of Christian thinking are controlled by metaphysical, psychological and ethical considerations rather than by the *eschaton*. We can be easily deceived by the imperatives of the ethical when they do not proceed from the indicatives. Responses made by manipulation of the psychological do not constitute Kingdom responses because they are not from the Spirit of the *eschaton*. Worship of the god almighty (the metaphysical god) who is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the everlasting Father, is not the worship of transformed humanity.

We are preoccupied with the present—the here and now. We seek the promise of perfection. The medical world wants to be able to heal without pain and to restore the body to perfection. We look to the future with more of the same of the present but only better. We have lost sight of the *eschaton*.

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PATER OF THE PAST, FATHER OF THE FUTURE

This sub-heading presents a false dichotomy. The *pater* of the past is the Father of the future. Even when we can hold to this, we still have a problem thinking beyond those two poles to the everlasting Father. God is Father and Creator and He directs history towards its fulfillment. The lesson from history is good, but it should not be the controlling factor. If we allow history to control, then we will only be producing a repeat of the past. We have ignored the Father of the future who directs the imperatives. The future directs the present and moves it towards its conclusion. A problem is our denial of the Creator. This denial fits into the human framework of going our own way—our rebellion. The *pater* of the past has established the indicatives through His Son. This denial is a denial of the indicatives and as a result we pursue the imperatives on our own accord and on our own terms. It is the Creator who brings us into being. It is the Creator who establishes the indicatives. It is the Creator who will restore our rebellion and bring us to the way we ought to be through the imperatives. This is the certainty of our hope in God and He has instilled into us the faith to trust in its fulfillment. ‘And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure’ (1 John 3:3).

Is eschatology relevant to our present? In what ways does it inform our present? Braaten relates an encounter with a pastor:

We are discovering that the American church is dying of its own success. It has tried hard to be relevant to its cultural setting, to foster a faith and worship practices that make people feel good. Churches that grow are the ones that seem to satisfy the search for self-fulfillment. They travel light. Churches that have traditionally defined themselves in terms of a core of biblical and confessional doctrines and practices, that retain the catholic substance of the church’s tradition, its dogmas, liturgies, hymnody and moral codes, carry so much baggage that they find it hard to compete with ‘Christianity Lite’. Pastors are pressured to get with it, to quit being hidebound to the traditional ways of being church. They are told to be more user-friendly. The pastor of one megachurch that successfully packs them in by the thousands was asked, ‘How do you do it?’ His answer: ‘When people come to our church, we want them to leave feeling like they have not even been in church.’⁸

The above encounter does not seem to show an awareness of the *pater* of the past nor the Father of the future. It exists only for the present. It illustrates the constructed reality of the human aspiration. We want a tower that reaches up to the heavens where we can then be in control of all that happens. We extract the human need and temperament as the substrate upon which with our expertise some kind of reality is constructed. The church has lost its sense of the *eschaton* in which the Kingdom of God is realised through the person of Christ. We need to come away from our constructed virtual reality to the reality of the *eschaton* in the Spirit.

THE EXPECTATION OF CHRIST’S RETURN

The return of Christ is the culmination of our eschatological hope. While Christians affirm the return of Christ, yet this has been thought of as something out of the

⁸ Carl E. Braaten, *The Recovery of Apocalyptic Imagination*, eds C. E. Braaten and R. W. Jensen (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 2002), p. 26.

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ordinary and unconnected to the whole thrust of history. The Son of God has ushered in the *eschaton* and Hebrews affirms that He is also the Creator. He is the beginning and the end, as is said in Revelation:

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end (Rev. 22:13).

The bodily return of Christ is a logical necessity. If Christ is the alpha and the omega, and if He is present in the beginning in creation, why should He not figure prominently in the end since the whole of creation finds its summation⁹ in Him? Why should His return be surprising? If He is the omega, then why shouldn't He be there when it all happens? During Jesus' bodily ascension into heaven, we were told that He 'will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven' (Acts 1:11).

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL CHURCH

The church is eschatological not because she has the expertise and know-how to bring about the *eschaton*¹⁰ but because she is in Christ who has brought about the fulfillment of the *eschaton*.

The church is eschatological not because she has incorporated born again believers into her membership but because the born again believers are incorporated into the body of Christ.

The church is eschatological not because she is perfect, but because she is being perfected in Christ.

The church is eschatological not because she is able to structure her community in conformity to the eschatological pattern of the early church but because the structures, which may be new and different, have arisen from the work of the indwelling Spirit within the community of the people of the Kingdom.

At a time when the scientific world is talking of the end of certainty,¹¹ the eschatological church lives in the certainty of the end.¹²

⁹ Eph. 1:10.

¹⁰ Some have thought that by going out to evangelise all the people groups on earth, this will hasten the return of Christ.

¹¹ Ilya Prigogine, *The End of Certainty* (Free Press, New York, 1997). It has been thought that the universe is controlled by fixed physical laws as taught in Newtonian physics. Prigogine argued that the more we know about the universe, the more difficult it becomes to believe in determinism.

¹² Since Christ is the fulfilment of the *eschaton*, to live in the certainty of the end is to live in Christ.