

# The Forgotten Christian Hope

by Anthony Buzzard

No reader of the New Testament can fail to be struck by the irrepressible Hope which pervades the pages of the Apostolic writings. Contemporary commentators lament the absence of a comparable sense of excitement and anticipation in current religion. The clue to the exuberance of the New Testament writers lies not only in their present experience as instruments of the Risen Christ, but also in the nature of the glorious future prospect to which their Master had taught them to look forward. That hope has been very largely lost, the churches having substituted for the original clear vision of the Coming Kingdom of God on earth the vaguest hope of an indefinite “heaven.”

The contemporary church-goer, if he even anticipates life after death at all, expects *at death* to pass into an ethereal realm “on the other side.” The early Christian believed nothing of the sort. By contrast, he expected, based on teaching he had received from Christ and the Apostles themselves, one day to rise from the sleep of death (Dan. 12:2, Isa. 26:19, Eccl. 9:5, I Cor. 15:20), to gain immortality, and to participate as associate ruler in the Messianic Kingdom, the universal Reign of Christ and the Saints *on the earth*. The New Testament Hope is thus strongly directed towards the Great Event, the Return of Messiah to inaugurate His Kingdom in a renewed earth.

Our popular notion that the Reign of Jesus is limited to a present rule “in the heart” creates a vast gulf between nearly all denominational versions of Christianity and the original Apostolic preaching. We have invented a Christ, “another Jesus,” of a different order from the Jesus presented in the N. T.; for the Jesus of the New Testament is *Messiah* in the full and true Hebraic sense. He must therefore return to rule the earth in His Kingdom.

## The Apostolic Message

It is an astonishing fact that so little attention is paid in contemporary preaching to the theme which forms an indispensable part of the Apostolic Message. That theme is found throughout the New Testament and is summarised in a few brief but all-important statements in Luke’s account in Acts of the two classic sermons delivered by Peter. These dynamic public addresses merit careful analysis, for they incorporate the essential elements of New Testament evangelism. The content of the two sermons can be summarised under eight headings, seven of which are relatively familiar; the eighth, it is suggested, has been very widely rejected, with disastrous results for modern evangelism. The New Testament Apostolic Message is as follows:

1. Old Testament prophecy has been fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. (About a quarter of what Peter says is quotation from the Old Testament.)
2. You crucified Jesus, who is the promised Messiah.
3. God resurrected Him from the dead.
4. We are eye-witnesses of the resurrection.
5. You may now receive the Holy Spirit.
6. All who repent, believe the Message about the Kingdom of God and the Name of Jesus (Acts 8:12, 28:23, 31), are baptised and call upon the Name of Jesus, will be saved.
7. Having been “appointed Lord and Messiah,” (Acts 2:34-36) Christ now sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven...(Ps. 110:1)
- 8...**Until** His Return to the earth to bring about the Restoration of all things, which is the theme of all the Old Testament prophets (Acts 3:21).

Now it is apparent that seven of the points made by Peter refer to the past and present. In general these have been received in traditional Christianity, though in the present century the doctrines of the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy and of the resurrection as a real historical event have been widely discarded. Yet the final element in the proclamation, relating to the culmination and completion of the Messianic drama has been almost entirely forgotten, leaving a huge void in our understanding of the Christian Message. This crucial eighth element has to do with what the Christian faith promises for the future, and in it lies nothing less than the vindication and triumph of the work of Christ, and the future prospect of peace for mankind as a whole; in a word, the glorious Hope that the Messiah will return to rule on earth.

It is a disconcerting fact that the churches, especially those who protest their loyalty to the biblical revelation, should have almost universally rejected the reality of the Christian Hope. It is hard to imagine the transformation which would take place amongst students of Christianity were they to embrace the Hope offered them in the Apostolic Good News. For it has not been fully realized that the goal of Christianity is not only that the individual should gain the Life of the Coming Age (mistranslated “everlasting life” in our standard versions), but enter the Kingdom of God inaugurated by the return of the Messiah, and serve with Him in a world-wide government destined to restore all things to the state of perfection which man on his own has so signally failed to achieve. This hope was held by the early church as the prevailing orthodoxy for two and a half centuries; thereafter, under the poisonous influence of alien Greek ideas, a totally new concept was introduced. Despite the efforts of the Reformers to recover the purity of the Apostolic teaching, the Christian Hope was in general never reinstated, with the result that we have inherited a legacy of notions thought to be Christian, but bearing no resemblance to the teachings of the New Testament.

Such is the strength of our attachment to tradition that few, it seems, are willing to examine their beliefs in the light of the biblical revelation upon which these beliefs are supposedly based. The only wise course is to subject all received teachings to the light of the Scriptures. We shall do well to heed the uncomfortable words of the Saviour that those who worship the One God must do so “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24) and that it is possible to “worship in vain, teaching [or believing] for doctrines the commandments of men” (Mat 15:9). The purity of the Christian faith can only be recovered by returning to the “blue-print” of the Apostolic teaching, faithfully recorded for us in the New Testament.

### **Modern Rejection of the Christian Hope**

It is the unanimous view of all the New Testament writers that Jesus the Messiah will come back to this earth to reign. However much this concept may now rate with popular science-fiction in the minds of late 20th century man, we must either abandon the opinions of Jesus, Paul, Peter, John and Jude, or receive the doctrine of the Return of Christ as a central and indispensable tenet of the apostolic proclamation. There is no middle ground. Too often we allow ourselves to select from the New Testament only what we find acceptable, under the pressure of wishing to accommodate our beliefs to the so-called scientific age; but belief in the Return of Christ is surely no more or less “scientific” in the 20th century than it was when it was first proclaimed. Not to believe in it is to make Christ and the Apostles liars. Yet every device conceived by the human mind has been invented to avoid the admission that Jesus constantly taught that He would return in power and glory. “Scholarship” has gone to extraordinary lengths to concoct reasons to excuse us from believing this central teaching.

Take, for example, the efforts of expositors to convince us that the doctrine of the Return of Christ is no more than a piece of Jewish fiction introduced into Christianity by the early church. The *International Critical Commentary* has the following to say about two well-known theologians, Hase (*Geschichte Jesu*, section 97) and Colani (*Jesus Christ et les Croyances Messianiques de son Temps*):

“They and others think that Jesus had penetration enough to foresee and predict the destruction of Jerusalem, *but they cannot believe that He was such a fanatic as to foretell that He would return in glory and judge the world.* Hence they conclude that these predictions [Luke 21] about the Parousia [Second Coming] were never uttered by Him” (*Comm.* on Luke, p. 487).

The words attributed to Jesus are supposed therefore to have been derived from a fictitious apocalypse assigned to the year A.D. 68, or thereabouts. On this hypothesis we must now rid ourselves of the fables so earnestly believed and preached by Paul and all the Apostles, since the New Testament writers were deluded into accepting the work of an unknown author bent on stamping his own imaginings with the authority of Jesus Himself. But is it credible that a writing otherwise unknown should have had an influence on the Apostles sufficient to contribute the very basis for their hopes for the future? A much safer course is to take the New Testament records as they stand and believe that Jesus confirmed the Old Testament hope that Messiah would one day return to reign. Jesus' whole view of the future can be traced to the Old Testament prophets. Since He has already claimed that the events of His first coming were foreseen by the prophets, it is entirely reasonable that the prophecies of Messiah's Return in power and glory will be fulfilled in Him also.

In our wisdom, and with the benefit of "scholarship," we claim to know better than the Apostles. We, not they, will be the arbiters of what Jesus taught and what He did not. Brushing aside the evidence of Luke, a writer described by Sir William Ramsay as "among the historians of first rank" (*St Paul the Traveller*, p.4); refusing the witness of all the Apostles, the personal companions of Jesus, and discarding the consensus of the whole early church for two centuries, we now deny what was the very kernel of the Good News--namely that the Messiah would one day reappear to establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

Assessing the value of Paul's witness to the future Return of Jesus, and the promised resurrection to occur at that time, the celebrated expositor, Dean Alford, says:

"I believe that our Lord uttered the words ascribed to Him in John 16:12,13: 'Many things I have to say to you, but you cannot bear them yet. The spirit of truth will lead you into all truth.' I believe the Apostolic epistles to be written proof of the fulfilment of that promise, as the apostolic preachings and labours were the spoken and acted proof; and in such passages as I Thess. 4:13-17, and I Cor. 15, I believe Paul to have been giving utterance not to his own subjective human opinions, but to truths which the spirit of God had given to him, which he put forth indeed in writing and speaking, as God had placed him in a church which does not know the time of her Lord's coming, as God had constituted his own mind the vessel and organ of these truths, and gifted him with the power of words, *but still as being the truth for the church to be guided by, not his own forebodings for her to be misled by...* This is a position, the holding or the rejecting of which might very simply and strictly be shown to constitute the difference between one who receives, and one who repudiates the Christian revelation itself" (*Alford Greek Testament*, Vol. III, p.65).

The serious student of the New Testament must realize that despite the claim of contemporary religion to be Christian, a comparison between the content of present-day preaching and that of the Apostolic Good News will reveal that the Message of early Christianity is largely not preached, and therefore unknown. It comes as a shock to the average church-goer to learn that the urgency of the New Testament Message is derived from the conviction that the Messiah will one day descend from the heavens and assume the reins of world government, putting an end to the present mismanagement of world affairs. The New Testament proclamation demands our urgent response to this Message of the Good News of the coming Reign of God. In His very first recorded public utterance, Jesus calls upon us all to "repent and believe the Good News about the Kingdom!" (Mark 1:14, 15.) Our response to this summons will determine whether or not we are prepared to accept Jesus as the Messiah, who was destined not only to come to die for the sins of the world, but who, after a period of absence, must return to the earth to vindicate publicly His Messianic office. It is the consistent message of the Scriptures that the Messiah shall rule on the earth, and that all nations must submit to His authority, or perish.

Now it is this all-important *second* act of the Messianic drama which has been almost entirely dismissed from contemporary preaching. With the scholars quoted above, we have been unwilling to accept that Jesus was "such a fanatic as to believe that He would return in glory to judge the world." Yet this is

precisely His claim, and one which cost Him His life at the hands of His unbelieving compatriots. The crucial question facing each one of us is whether we are any less faithless than they; for it would appear that even those who claim allegiance to the Christian faith have very largely discarded that vital part of the Apostolic Message which announces in the clearest terms that the Christ must reappear to bring about the great Restoration of all things, the ultimate consolation of Israel, which will entail nothing less than the inauguration of the Reign of God on earth.

It is commonly believed that the acceptance of a future Reign of Christ is a speculative “optional extra.” This is very far from being true to the teaching of the New Testament; for salvation itself is predicated on a belief in the “Message of the Kingdom of God and the things concerning the Name of Jesus” (Mark 1:15, Acts 8:12, 19:8, 20:25, 28:23,31). Anything less than this is a distortion of the Gospel, and must therefore qualify as “another Gospel,” and rate as both dangerous and ineffective (Gal. 1:7-9). It is an uncomfortable New Testament fact that the rejection of the full Message of Jesus and the Apostles amounts to a refusal to believe and “love the truth” (II Thess. 2:10-13). Such an attitude puts us in the grip of a delusion by which we then believe “what is false” (II Thess. 2:11). It should be carefully noted that verse 14 of this same chapter equates a belief of the truth with the acceptance of the Good News; but to reject the Good News is to “delight in unrighteousness” (verse 12).

We may now return to our analysis of the discourse delivered by Peter and recorded by Luke in the Book of Acts. We have noted that the Old Testament prophecies had been fulfilled; the people had crucified Jesus, the Messiah; God had resurrected Him; the Apostles were eye-witnesses of this unparalleled event. The Holy Spirit is now available to all (initially to Jews only, later to Gentiles also) who would repent and believe the Message of the Kingdom, be baptised, and call upon Jesus for salvation. The Messiah had now returned to His Father, but only until the time for the Restoration of all things--the principal theme of all Old Testament prophecy (Acts 3:21).

The evident purpose of Peter’s statement here is to meet the enormous difficulty which his Jewish audience would have in understanding why Jesus, if indeed He was the promised Messiah, had now departed into the heavens instead of remaining on earth to set up His Kingdom. While 20th-century church-goers have in general long since ceased to believe that Christ will ever return to fulfil the innumerable biblical promises of Messiah’s Rule over a restored earth in which universal justice and peace will prevail, Peter preached that the temporary absence of Christ was a necessary part of the divine purpose. But when the appointed moment arrives, Jesus will as certainly return from the heavens as He had departed at His ascension (Acts 1:11). Then indeed the great Old Testament vision of the world-wide Reign of the Messiah shall surely come to pass.

Now it will not be difficult to understand that we have been accustomed to thinking of the future in very different terms. We have been taught by our creeds to think of a single “judgment day” as an event of the remote future (if indeed it bears any relationship to time at all), spelling doom for the wicked and promising rewards for the righteous, who however, we believe (and teach our children) *already* enjoy the beatific vision in heaven. This confusion of a *present* bliss in heaven with a future resurrection to life has led us, understandably in face of an irreconcilable contradiction, to abandon all concept of time; and with this our vision of the glorious future presented by the Old and New testaments; for why should it be necessary for the righteous to receive corporately at a future resurrection and judgment what they already possess individually “in the blessed heavenly state”? The whole matter can make very little sense in these terms, and it is hardly surprising that the entire Christian eschatology (study of the future) has been widely dismissed as incoherent and irrelevant.

Very different, however, was the view of the Apostles who looked forward with the utmost certainty and clarity to the times of the Restoration of all things, and consequently spoke of “loving the appearing” of their Lord (II Tim. 4:8), who would inaugurate those glorious times. The entire New Testament strains towards the fulfillment of the “blessed Hope” (Titus 2:13) of Messiah’s return to the earth. That event would usher in the times of the Reign of God in its public manifestation world-wide; and entry into that

Reign with Christ is the grand goal of Christianity. It is also the heart of the Gospel Message (Mark 1:14, 15, Luke 4:43, Acts 8:12, 28:23, 31).

It is the purpose of this study to urge that the New Testament Hope be reinstated. Why should not Acts 3:21, which speaks of the Great Restoration--the "Apokatastasis"--become the constant watchword of Christians everywhere? We must reintroduce New Testament vocabulary, if we are to reinstate New Testament beliefs. The Apokatastasis is the glorious reconstitution and renewal of all things. It is elsewhere in the New Testament designated as the Age to Come, the supreme goal for which the Christian strives. In contemporary terms it will mean the establishment on earth of a society free from the ravages of disease, poverty, ignorance and the threat of extinction. The Apostolic Message is that Christianity and its Messiah have yet to affect the exterior world, universally, not only the hearts of a few individuals in the "present evil age." The option to believe or not to believe in the Risen Messiah will not remain open indefinitely; for He is to be manifested publicly as world-governor. He must remain absent until that Great Day.

### **The Two Ages**

It is now a well-documented fact that the New Testament, in common with 1st-century Judaism, divided time into two contrasted periods, "the present evil age" (Gal. 1:4), and the Messianic "Age to Come" (Luke 18:30, etc.). The future state is thus envisaged by the New Testament writers as definitely within the bounds of time. It is therefore designated as the "Coming Age" (Eph. 1:21, Luke 18:30, Mark 10:30), the "Future Age" (Mat. 12:32), "that [well-known] Age" (Luke 20:35). It is further described as the "future inhabited world of which we speak" (Heb. 2:5). It is in stark contrast to the "present evil age" (Gal 1:4), "the present age" (I Tim. 6:17, Titus 2:12). The key word here is the Greek "aion" (age). The future Age is the Age of the Kingdom of God (Luke 18:24,30) and of that Life which is then granted to those who attain to "that [well-known] Age" through resurrection (Luke 20:35). This Life is strictly speaking described therefore not as "everlasting life," but as "*the Life of the Coming Age.*" This Coming Age is the great climax towards which the whole New Testament (indeed the Old Testament, also) moves.

Regrettably, the biblical concentration upon this future Age has been largely obscured in our standard versions by the use of the term "everlasting," which really means "pertaining to the Coming Age." More important still is the fact that the commonly used term "for ever" in our translations means literally "during the Coming Age". We may refer to the "*Handbook to the Grammar of the Greek Testament*", by Samuel Green, D.D., and on page 245 we find 'eis ton aiona,' for ever, literally 'unto or during the Age.'" Ordinary readers have thus not been permitted to see the prominence which the New Testament writers give to the vital subject of the "Coming Age". The mistaken conclusion has been drawn that it is only in the book of Revelation that a reference is made to a coming (millennial) Age. The truth is that the future Age of the Reign of Christ and His Saints is everywhere in view in the New Testament It is the subject of all the New Testament statements about the ultimate Hope of the believer.

To enter the Kingdom is to enter the Life of the Coming Age. To gain immortality is to attain to the Life of the Coming Age. The "everlasting Gospel" is really the Gospel (Good News) of the Coming Age, and "everlasting comfort" is predicated upon hope of attaining the Life of the Coming Age. (See Rev. 14:6, II Thess. 2:16 -- "the consolation based on the Hope of the Coming Age.") "To live for ever" is thus in the minds of the early Christians to gain the "Life of the Future Age", and "everlasting punishment" means exclusion from the Life of the Coming Age, not therefore literally endless punishment. It follows also that the much debated "everlasting sin" of Mark 3:29 (the unpardonable sin) is the sin which excludes entry into the Coming Age. The implications of these simple retranlations are enormous, and we will support our argument by quoting from Alan Richardson's *Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 72-74, 98:

**"In later Judaism the conception of Life had acquired a markedly eschatological character as a quality of the Age to Come.... The character of Life, which the New Testament takes over from later Judaism is thoroughly eschatological.... (The phrase) 'aionian life' is thoroughly Jewish.... It would be clearly improper to read Platonic notions about eternity into the**

**phrase: 'aionios' in this context cannot mean 'eternal' in the Platonic sense as being outside time.... The fact is that the New Testament 'Life,' or more fully 'aionian Life' is one of the characteristic marks of the Age to Come, as distinct from this age.** Thus what appears in the English versions as 'eternal life' or 'life everlasting' *really means 'the Life of the Age to Come'....* Throughout the New Testament 'aionian Life' means 'the Life of the Age to Come.' *It is synonymous with the Kingdom of God....* We shall be spared the moral anxieties raised by translations such as 'everlasting punishment' (AV), or 'eternal punishment' (RV), if we reflect that 'aionian' *does not mean 'everlasting.'* The real issue concerns the character of the punishment as that of the order of the Age to Come as contrasted with any earthly penalties.... The chief implication of 'aionian' is not 'eternal' or 'everlasting', but rather 'pertaining to the Age to Come'" (emphasis added).

### **The Future Great Restoration**

The obscuring of the New Testament Hope through inexact translation has meant that in the minds of most church-goers the reality of the salvation story ends with the disappearance of Jesus from the earthly scene. Whatever remains of the drama thereafter is transacted 'in heaven,' and makes no impact on the earth. Nothing could be further from the biblical truth. Jesus, Peter says, must remain absent *until* "the time comes for all things to be made new" (Acts 3:21, Good News Bible). We quote the same passage more accurately translated by Dr. Weymouth: "Heaven must retain Him, until those times of which God has spoken from the lips of His Holy Prophets-- the Times of the Reconstitution of all things." The virtue of this more accurate rendering is that it enables us to understand that it is those celebrated *times*, due to begin with the Return of the Messiah, which are the central theme of prophecy. Clearly we shall have to examine the Message of the Old Testament prophets to find out what is involved in the "times of the Restoration" (Peter assumed that his audience knew!). In so doing we shall be following the example of Paul who "from morning to evening explained the Kingdom of God to them from personal testimony, and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and the Prophets" (Acts 28:23).

The events described by Peter as the Restoration of all things (Acts 3:21) are thus seen to be much more than an indefinite judgment day, about which very little can be known. For the Restoration is nothing less than the total content of the Old Testament prophetic Message, "to which we do well to give heed as to a light shining in a dark place, until the Day should dawn" (I Pet. 1:19).

It is axiomatic in the history of biblical interpretation that where men refuse to believe the clear message of Scripture, generally because it threatens received tradition, they will create every possible difficulty to produce the necessary "smoke-screen." This can be illustrated by pointing to the attempts which have been made to corrupt the simplicity of the Apostolic statement of Acts 3:21. It will hardly appear credible to the ordinary reader that efforts were made to apply the time of the great *future* Restoration to the *present* experience of Christians. That sound expositors have been forced to do battle with such illegitimate treatment is proof itself of the vital importance of a right understanding of this passage. We find the learned Dean Alford, for example, having to contradict the attempts to render the word "until" as "during"! Such impossible translations would effectively transpose future events to the present and thus destroy the great future Hope. Commenting on the passage "Christ must remain in heaven *until...*", Dean Alford writes:

"Not 'during' as the advocates of the present spiritual sense of the passage wish to render it, but '*until*' .... I cannot see how Restoration can be applied to the work of the Spirit during this interim state in the hearts of men. This would be contrary to all scripture analogy. I understand it of the glorious Restoration of all things, the Rebirth (as in Mat. 19:28, when the Apostles are to be rulers over Israel), which, as Peter says here is the theme of all the prophets from the beginning" (*Greek Testament*, Vol. II, pp. 38, 39).

It is essential that Christians begin to restate in unequivocal terms their faith in this essential yet forgotten element of the Gospel Message. For this Message means not only salvation for the individual, who is destined to share in the Reign of the Messiah at the time of the Restoration, but world peace as promised in the famous prophecy of Isaiah 2: "[The Messiah] will settle disputes among great nations. They will hammer their swords into ploughs and their spears into pruning-knives. Nations will never again go to war, never prepare for battle again" (Isa. 2:4).

The future universal Rule of the Messiah is described on nearly every page of the Hebrew scriptures:

"A new King will arise from among David's descendants. The Spirit of the Lord will give Him wisdom, and the knowledge and skill to rule His people.... At His command the people will be punished, and evil persons will die. He will rule His people with justice and integrity. Wolves and sheep will live together in peace.... Lions will eat straw as cattle do. Even a baby will not be harmed if it plays near a poisonous snake. On Zion, God's sacred hill, there will be nothing harmful or evil. The land will be full of knowledge of the Lord as the seas are full of water" (see Isa. 11:1-9).

Quoting again from the Good News Bible, we find a section headed "the Future King": "His Royal power will continue to grow; His Kingdom will always be at peace. He will rule as King David's successor, basing His power on right and justice" (Isa. 9:7). This sublime Hope of a world filled with the "knowledge of the Lord" is carried forward into the New Testament. The angel announces that one day "the Lord will make Jesus King, as His ancestor David was... His Kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:33). The Apostles were promised rulership as Kings in the coming New World (Mat. 19:28, see Moffatt, and the Good News Bible). The New Testament church held as a fundamental article of faith the belief that the church was destined to rule the world (I Cor. 6:2, II Tim. 2:12, Rev. 2:26, 3:21, 5:10, 20:1-6). Indeed the future reconstituted inhabited world was the very essence of the Apostles' preaching (Heb. 2:5--"For God did not subject to angels the future inhabited world of which we speak"). This Golden Age is further specifically defined as the Millennial period in Rev. 20.

It is essential to realize that every exegetical device has been employed to obscure the plain scriptural witness to this coming Age of Restoration. The evidence of church history points to the amazing fact that the once universal orthodox belief in the coming Kingdom of God on earth, firmly held by the church for two and a half centuries, was ultimately banished by professing believers who were bent on disparaging the central Hope of Apostolic Christianity.

"There has been no age of the church," says the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "in which the Millennium was not admitted by individual divines of the first eminence.... *Millennial doctrine was universal in the first ages*". The following statement of Dr. Whitby is arresting indeed:

**"The doctrine of the Millennium, or the Reign of the Saints on earth for a thousand years, is now rejected by all Roman Catholics and by the greatest part of Protestants, and yet it passed among the best of Christians for 250 years for an apostolic tradition, and as such is believed by many fathers of the second and third centuries."**

Mosheim, the noted historian, confirms that "long before this period (the third century), an opinion had prevailed that Christ was to come and reign a thousand years among men, before the entire and final dissolution of the world; this opinion had hitherto met with no opposition."

### **A Departure from Apostolic Teaching**

The evidence before us points to the astonishing fact that a radical shift in thinking has taken place. Such a transformation is only explicable if we are prepared, with Paul and the other Apostles, to reckon seriously with the reality of the forces of opposition to the Christian Message. These enemies of the Truth have, however, appeared in the guise of Christian teachers. This will come as no surprise to those who have examined the New Testament warnings of this subject:

“The time will come when people will not listen to sound doctrine, but will follow their own desires, and will collect for themselves more and more teachers who will tell them what they are itching to hear. They will turn away from listening to the Truth and give their attention to legends” (II Tim. 4:3,4).

These were Paul’s solemn words to his disciple Timothy. He had earlier given a very similar warning to the elders at Ephesus:

“I know that after I leave, fierce wolves will come among you, and will not spare the flock. The time will come when some men from your own group will tell lies to lead the believers away after them” (Acts 20:29,30).

The introduction of error by professing Christians was equally foreseen by Peter:

“False prophets appeared in the past among the people, and in the same way false teachers will appear among you. They will bring in destructive, untrue doctrines, and will deny the Master who redeemed them, and so they will bring upon themselves sudden destruction. Even so, many will follow their immoral ways; and because of what they do, others will speak evil of the way of Truth” (II Pet. 2:1-2).

It is important to note that false doctrine is not confined to teachings leading to immoral conduct. The distortion of the belief in the resurrection and its place in the Christian message was seen as equally pernicious by Paul:

“Keep away from profane and foolish discussions, which only drive people further away from God. Such teaching is like an open sore that eats away the flesh. Two men who have taught such things are Hymenaeus and Philetus. They have left the way of truth and are upsetting the faith of some believers *by saying that our resurrection has already taken place*” (II Tim. 16-18).

The disappearance of the great Hope of a future Reign of Christ on earth can be traced to a thoroughly dishonest treatment of the well-known passage in the Revelation given to John (Rev. 20). Since this section of scripture proclaims in unmistakable terms the future Reign of God to which the entire Bible looks forward, and since such a doctrine was no longer palatable to Platonically minded church fathers, a way had to be found by which lip-service would be paid to the Christian scriptures while their plain meaning was denied. The evidence speaks for itself, and we quote a very remarkable statement by the well-known contemporary scholar, John Hick:

“What Augustine was to stigmatise as the “ridiculous fancies” of Millenarianism, an initial selective resurrection inaugurating the 1000 years earthly rule of Christ and His Saints, followed by a second general resurrection and judgement, *gradually faded from the Christian imagination during the third, fourth and fifth centuries*. Augustine exerted his immense authority against the Millenarianists, arguing not that the expectations expressed in the Revelation to John were mistaken, but that the passage in question *does not mean what it says...* It is interesting to watch him at work reinterpreting scriptural passages, *whose plain meaning he rejects*. In this case he offers a Bultmann-like demythologisation of the “first resurrection” consisting in the rising to faith of those souls who believe in Jesus and are baptized in His Name. The thousand years Reign of the Saints thus becomes the earthly life of the redeemed in the church during the present age.... According to Augustine the second and general resurrection, unlike the first was to be a literal bodily event” (*Death and Eternal Life*, p. 197, emphasis added).

It will be clear to the reader that we are dealing here with a blatant refusal to believe plain statements. The comments on Rev. 20 found in the celebrated *Commentary on the Bible* by Peake are a striking witness to the suppression of biblical information:

“Christ is described as reigning with the martyrs for a thousand years. The interpretation of this statement has caused endless controversy... The view which was originally held, and which is

strongly advocated in Daniel, maintained that the Kingdom of God which was to be established on earth would be everlasting (Dan. 2:44, 7:27). Since the time of Augustine, however, an effort has been made to allegorise the statements of Revelation and apply them to the history of the church. The binding of Satan refers to the binding of the strong man by the stronger foretold by Christ... *The thousand years is not to be construed literally*, but represents the whole history of the church from the incarnation to the final conflict. The reign of the Saints is a prophecy of the domination of the world by the church... The first resurrection is metaphorical, and simply refers to the spiritual resurrection of the believer in Christ. *But exegesis of this kind is dishonest trifling*. To put such an interpretation on the “first resurrection” is simply playing with terms. If we *explain away the obvious meaning of words*, then, as Alford says, ‘There is an end of all significance in language and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything’“ (emphasis mine).

It is essential to understand that the very widely-held “amillennial” views of Augustine are based upon “dishonest trifling”, the “rejection of the plain meaning” of words. Moreover, the enormous influence exercised by Augustine has been responsible for the very commonly held notion that the Kingdom of God is to be equated with the church. This teaching results in the rejection of the Kingdom of God as the great future Hope for our world. It is remarkable that we are so unwilling to expose error, especially of this magnitude. Is it right that we should treat with indifference the statement of C.E.B. Cranfield (*Commentary on Mark*, p.67) that “it should be plain that the identification of the Kingdom of God with the Church made by Augustine, *which has become deeply rooted in Christian thinking, is not true to the teaching of Jesus*”? (emphasis mine) It should be sufficiently clear that what is not true to the teaching of Jesus is a lie and must be labeled as such.

It is the great fascination of error that it appears in garb of sophistication and is associated with “great” names in theology. Surely it should not be difficult to discern that falsification of the Word of God, in a matter as fundamental as the Kingdom of God, cannot proceed from the servants of the Truth. Yet “even Satan can disguise himself to look like an angel of light! So it is no great thing if his servants disguise themselves to look like servants of righteousness” (II Cor. 11:14,15). These are “hard sayings” for 20th century man; but they are nevertheless a vital part of the Apostolic witness and wisdom.

Despite the prevailing rejection of the Christian Hope (surely a fair indication of the extent of the apostasy foreseen by Paul), there have been occasional revivals of the biblical vision, invariably at the risk of attack from so-called orthodoxy. An interesting example is the Baptists’ Confession of Faith, presented by them to Charles II in March, 1660. Announcing that they were resolved to suffer persecution to the loss of goods, or life itself, rather than abandon their belief, they wrote:

“We believe that the same Lord Jesus, who showed Himself alive after His Passion, by many infallible proofs (Acts 1:3), who was taken up from His disciples and carried up into heaven (Luke 24:51) shall so come in like manner as He was seen to go into heaven (Acts 1:9,10,11). ‘And when Christ who is our life shall appear we shall also appear with Him in glory’ (Col. 3:4). For then shall He be King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev. 19:16); ‘for the Kingdom is His and He is the governor among the nations’ (Ps. 22:28), and King over all the earth (Zech. 14:9), and we shall reign with Him on earth (Rev. 5:10). The Kingdoms of this world (which men so mightily strive after here to enjoy) shall become the Kingdom of our Lord and His Christ (Rev. 11:15). ‘For all is yours (ye that overcome this world), for ye are Christ’s and Christ is God’s’ (I Cor. 3:22,23).’ For unto the saints shall be given the Kingdom, and the greatness of the Kingdom under (mark that!) the whole heaven’ (Dan. 7:27). Though alas now many men be scarce content that the saints should have so much as a being among them; but when Christ shall appear, then shall be their day, then shall be given them power over the nations, to rule them with a rod of iron (Rev. 2:26,27). Then shall they receive a crown of life which no man shall take away from them not will they be by any means overturned from it, for the oppressor shall be broken in pieces (Ps. 72:4), and his vain rejoicings turned into mourning and bitter lamentations, as it is written (Job 20:5-7).”

There can be no question that such is the simple Message of hope offered by the Scriptures. The almost universal rejection by Catholics and Protestants of the coming Golden Age of the Rule of Christ and the Saints is one of the great “mysteries” of popular theology, for it amounts to a rejection of the theme which Peter says is the burden of all the Old Testament prophets. When we consider that Christ’s Mission was to confirm the promises made to the Fathers (Rom. 15:8), we may begin to perceive the extent to which orthodox belief has discarded a vital element of the Christian Message. It remains an unarguable fact of church history that the once orthodox belief in the coming Kingdom of Christ on earth, held for two and a half centuries has ever since been regarded as most *unorthodox*. It is therefore essential that the individual searcher for truth return to the New Testament records in pursuit of that original orthodoxy, now viewed with apathy or branded as heresy.

### **The Messiah as World Ruler**

In examining the theme of Old Testament prophecy promised as the “restoration of all things”, we shall establish the fact that the prophecy of a Messiah who comes to die for the sins of the people is only part of the story. Though we may have accepted the suffering Messiah, we have blurred the vision of the “glory that shall follow,” and in particular we have overlooked the promised times of universal Reconstitution, the Apokatastasis (Acts 2:31), to be inaugurated by the Return of Messiah, “whom heaven must retain” until those glorious times (Acts 3:21). The resurrection of Jesus is the necessary prelude to His Coming again, the vindication of His Messianic office. Paul puts the point forcefully to the men of Athens in a brief summary of his message: “God has fixed a day in which he will judge [i.e. administer, cp Ps. 96:13] the whole world by means of a man he has chosen. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising that man from death.” (Acts 17:31) This is reminiscent of the passage in Hebrews, quoted earlier: “God has not placed the angels as rulers over the New World-- the world of which we speak” (Heb. 2:5); “Don’t you know that the Saints shall rule the world” (I Cor. 6:2), “but the unrighteous shall not inherit the Reign of God” (I Cor. 6:9). That New World is none other than the Age of Restoration, which the Christ is to inaugurate when he reappears in the glory of His Kingdom. The saints will join Him in supervising a new society on earth.

It will be instructive to note that Paul’s references to the future judgment of the world are simply paraphrases of well-known passages from the Old Testament describing the Messianic Kingdom: “The Lord reigns; the world also shall be established that it shall not be moved. He comes to judge the earth... He shall judge the world with righteousness and the people with His truth.” (Psalm 96:10, 13) Similarly in Psalm 22:27, 28: “All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the Kingdom is the Lord’s, and He is governor among the nations.” The Message of the coming Reign is conveyed to us more vividly when read from a modern translation: “The trees in the woods will shout for joy when the Lord comes to *rule* the earth. He will *rule* the peoples of the world with justice and fairness” (Ps. 96:12, 13, GNB). The proper use of the word ‘rule’ for ‘judge’ rescues these passages from obscurity. For though it is clear that ‘judgment’ would fall upon the men of Athens if they did not accept Jesus as Messiah, it is equally clear that the passage from which Paul quotes, exuberant as it is with the glorious prospect of the arrival of the Messiah, as King, refers to the establishment world-wide of the continuous, successful government of Christ.

Let us now summarize the mission of Jesus as described for us by the New Testament writers. As soon as John the Baptist had been silenced by Herod, Jesus began to herald the advent of the Kingdom of God, the dawning of the promised “Day of the Lord.” Jesus states that the days of His own ministry are the days of the proclamation of the Good News of the Kingdom of God (Luke 16:16). We should note carefully that Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom is distinct from the actual coming of the Kingdom which will not occur until His coming again in power. Several crucial passages will put this beyond doubt; for the coming of the Kingdom is synonymous with with the coming of Christ in glory: the Kingdom is near, about to arrive, at the time of the signs heralding Christ’s return. Luke reports that just as we recognize the arrival of the summer season by the appearance of leaves on the trees, so we are to be assured of the imminent arrival of

the Reign of God by the cataclysmic events which precede it (Luke 21:31). Moreover, the Passover will no more be celebrated by Jesus until the Kingdom of God *comes* (Luke 22:28), that is, until it is again celebrated *in the Kingdom* (Luke 22:16); and it is *in the Kingdom* that the Apostles will administer the affairs of Israel (Luke 22:29,30); at that future time the disciples are to celebrate with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom (Luke 13:28,29). These passages provide indisputable proof that the Reign of God was inseparable in Luke's mind from the *future* manifestation of the Messiah in glory.

The relationship between the present preaching of the Kingdom and its future coming is well described by Alan Richardson (*Introduction to New Testament Theology*, p. 85):

“Even now in the days of His preaching, men could accept or reject God's Reign; they could as it were anticipate for their own personal existence the Day of the Lord; they could in an eschatological sense even now pass through judgment and find salvation. But the fact that the great decision could be taken by those who heard Jesus proclaiming the drawing nigh of God's Reign *must not mislead us into supposing that the Reign of God had already arrived in any other sense than that the preaching is an eschatological anticipation of it...* We must not allow the Hebraic manner of speaking of a future event in the past tense *to mislead us into an interpretation of certain texts* which would be at variance with the whole New Testament eschatological programme. ‘The Kingdom of God has come upon you’ must mean in its context that the exorcisms wrought by Jesus are the signs of the coming victory of the Kingdom of God over the counter Kingdom of Satan” (emphasis added).

The importance of this statement cannot be overemphasized, for the warnings it contains have not been heeded. We *have* been misled into believing that the Kingdom of God is a present reign only, and its reality as the glorious Reign of the coming Age, the time of the Restoration, has been forgotten. Amillennialism is the name given to the misleading system which thinks of the Kingdom primarily as beginning at the cross and ongoing since that time. Postmillennialism instills the same false idea. It proposes that the human race will successfully produce peace on earth, *apart from* the future intervention of the Messiah at his Second Coming.

### **The Hope of the Kingdom of God on Earth**

In view of the exhilarating prospect of the coming Reign of God, Jesus established a new covenant between God and the New Israel, composed of Jews and Gentiles. He invites His followers to form a new priestly Kingdom in association with Himself as Messiah. He thought of Himself as the new Moses leading a new chosen people into the Promised Land of the Age to Come. It is the Old Testament song transposed into a new and more brilliant key. As chosen Messiah, Jesus gathered around Him the Community of the Reign of God, the fellowship of the Messianic Rule. This little flock to whom it was the Father's pleasure to give the Royal office (Luke 12:32) were thus to become co-rulers in the coming Messianic government: “I appoint you to a Kingdom even as my Father appointed me, and you shall sit on thrones ruling the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:29, 30).

To enter the Kingdom of God is not therefore merely to become a passive subject; it means to receive a share in God's Kingship, to be one of those appointed to reign in a government destined to fulfill the age-old utopian dreams of mankind. Paul likewise teaches that the saints shall reign in the Life of the Age to Come (Rom. 5:17). He reminds the Corinthians that their goal is to rule the world (I Cor. 6:2). He encourages the young evangelist Timothy with the prospect of rulership with Christ (II Tim. 2:12). In the Book of Revelation John defines the future function of the church: “*They shall rule on the earth*” (Rev. 5:10). Their true status as priestly kings will not be publicly manifested until the great day of the Return of Christ to establish His Millennial Reign (Rev. 20). That reign is to supersede the Kingdoms of this world (Rev. 11:15), which in their final form represent a monstrous counterfeit of God's Kingdom, the means by which the arch-deceiver, Satan, deludes the world into obeying him (Rev. 12:9). But Satan is to be deposed and banished (Rev. 20:3), so that the Kingdom of God may introduce the times of Universal Restoration of

the Sons of God in their glorious capacity as co-rulers with Messiah (Rom. 8:19, 22; Dan. 7:14, 1, 22, 29). “If we suffer with Him we shall be glorified with Him” (Rom 8:17). Jesus and the faithful will take over the reins of world government in God’s due time.

There could be no more breath-taking prospect for the church than this. The task of preparing for this awesome responsibility in the New Age demands of the Christian an earnest devotion to the matter of making His calling and election to royal office sure (II Pet. 1:11). A major part of this is the Christian’s responsibility to be “salt and light” to a dark world. By this means others will be attracted to the Gospel of the Kingdom. Christianity centers round “the things of the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” - such is Luke’s definition embracing the faith (Acts 8:12). Thus it is that the book of Acts ends with Paul “explaining the Kingdom of God from morning to evening from personal testimony, and trying to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and the Prophets. For two whole years Paul remained in his private lodging, welcoming anyone who came to visit him; he preached the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and taught them about the Lord Jesus Christ...” (see Moffatt, Acts 28:23,30,31).

Paul thus ends where Jesus Himself began, “preaching the Good News of the Reign of God,” and calling upon men to repent and believe the Good News (Mark 1:14, 15). The reader must judge whether men and women of the late twentieth century are conversant with this Message of Good News. Are not many strangers to this major theme of the Christian Gospel? Upon baptism, as responsible adults, and faith in the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, we can become members of the Messianic Community, the New Israel of God (Gal. 6:16). Through a life of trial and testing, lived in faith in the Risen Christ as Savior, we await His Coming again and our appointment to positions of authority, responsibility and service in the Universal Reign of the New Age, those eagerly-expected times of the Restoration of all things (Acts 3:21).

“Now, at the very outset, we express our firm belief that the Reign of Christ will be beyond all that has been ever witnessed, or seen, or known. To assert, as some are now asserting, that the present is the millennial dispensation [amillennialism], and that we are to have no other, is one of those wild, heady unscriptural declarations.... That Christ shall reign to an extent hitherto unknown is *so clearly revealed in the Word of Truth that, to our mind, nothing but the most obstinate unbelief or inveterate prejudice can deny it.*” (J.C. Philpot, M.A., on “The Future Extent of Christ’s Mediatorial Reign,” emphasis added).

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