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THE TRIBULATION OF THE CHURCH

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Introduction

There was a time when I was concerned with the interpretation of events associated with "end times." Two episodes shifted my focus of study. The first occurred as part of a course on eschatology at MBBC with F. C. Peters. I was critically evaluating the various positions regarding the tribulation. My critique of these writers for poor scholarship, proof texting and faulty assumptions was so sharp that Peters reminded me these people were Christian brothers. Therefore, even if I disagreed with their exegesis and conclusions, I should be more charitable. I began to realize that I was too young to be staking out positions on issues over which Christian theologians had disagreed for many centuries. That budding awareness was reinforced in an interview with M. C. Tenney, Dean of the Wheaton College Graduate School. I was interviewing for admission to the school, and was concerned, among other things, that the faculty have its eschatology straight. When I began pressing him, he suddenly looked at me and said, "young man you have no business asking such questions. Get the rest of your theology straight before you try to figure out the controversial aspects of end-time eschatology." Tenney's words were so humbling and wise that I have taken them seriously.

Since 1961 I have studied eschatological texts only in relation to my major areas of research and writing--christology, soteriology, ethics and ecclesiology--and only from an exegetical approach. I have not read the voluminous advocacy or polemical literature pertaining to end-time eschatology produced in the last 17 years. This literature, therefore, is noticeably absent from the bibliography.

This does mean that I come at the question fresh and without any clear prior conviction about the sequence of end-time events. I do not understand myself as either a pre-tribulationist or a post-tribulationist. I confess only to be pro-parousia; I believe in the parousia of Jesus Christ our Lord. If this paper tilts one way or another, please accept it as a function of exegesis, not as a function of a prior commitment to any of the prevailing options.

Because this paper represents a new venture in research and writing for me, I want to acknowledge publically the joy I have experienced in exegesis and reflection upon one narrow slice of texts related to questions of final eschatology. The exegesis and the conclusions represent preliminary thoughts which are submitted by one brother to brothers and sisters in the church for testing and discernment. If I do not answer some questions which you consider

important it is either because I do not know the question or because the question is not raised and addressed in the biblical texts I have chosen as central to the assigned topic.

Basic Assumptions

Since all of us bring a history to the reading of the Bible, and thus read it with "glasses" which filter its meaning for us, I am compelled at the outset to expose my "glasses," to articulate the basic assumptions which shape my thinking on the question under consideration. Therefore, I confess to the following presuppositions:

1) I believe in the full authority of the Scriptures for all matters of faith and life. Therefore, our eschatology must be rooted in biblical exegesis. Where the Bible is clear, we must be clear. Where the Bible leaves room for uncertainty and/or contrary interpretations, we must be tolerant, charitable and open to change.

2) I believe the eschaton (the end) began in the Christ event. Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is now moving toward the telos (the final fulfillment). The Kingdom of God is being partially realized now already in the community of believers, the church.

3) I believe that God is creating one people in the world. Therefore, I believe in the continuity of the true Israel and the church.

4) I believe in the theological priority of the New Testament in biblical revelation. God has spoken finally and most clearly in Jesus Christ and in the apostles of Christ who wrote the documents which now constitute our New Testament. OT prophecies are relevant in the formulation of a biblical eschatology only if they are affirmed and interpreted in the New Testament. OT prophecies which have not been fulfilled in our judgement, but which are not quoted and/or affirmed in the NT, cannot be used in the formulation of a biblical eschatology. I am not saying that these prophecies will or will not be fulfilled, but that we do not know how to understand them in light of the NT silence concerning them. The best we can do, therefore, is to be silent in relation to them as well and let God do his thing in his way and in his time.

5) I believe that the purpose of biblical eschatology is hope and morality. The teachings about the end were given to the church to strengthen the hope of believers in the certainty of God's lordship over history and to encourage them to live faithfully in the light of the ever imminent end of history. The purpose

of biblical eschatology is not calendarization.

6) I believe that the NT does not give a clear word on the time of the parousia in relation to other end-time events. In this presupposition I am in full agreement with the chief protagonists for the pre-tribulation and post-tribulation positions. Thus, for example, both J. F. Walvoord and G. E. Ladd confess that the Scripture does not explicitly teach a pre-tribulation or post-tribulation rapture.¹ I differ from them in finding it contradictory to assert such but then proceed to write polemical books trying to prove what they have just confessed the Scripture does not state with clarity. If the Scripture is not clear on an issue, I can only achieve clarity by imposing my pre-understanding on the biblical text.

7) I believe the methodology for studying biblical eschatology in general, and the question of the relation of the tribulation to the parousia in particular, must be based upon and limited to a careful reading of the biblical texts in which we ask what did the original writers mean by what they said. We can say no more than they, but also no less.

Basic Approach

I understand the central issue in the assigned topic, "The Tribulation of the Church," to be the question of the relation of the tribulation to the parousia. Will the parousia be pre-, mid- or post-tribulation?

The approach of this paper will be to exegete in outline fashion the chief NT texts related to the parousia, Mk. 13 and par., 1 Thes. 4.13-5.11, and 2 Thess. 2.1-12. The exegesis is based on the best available exegetical literature, not on advocacy literature for any current interpretation. In other words, I have tried to read these passages, which everyone agrees are the central texts regarding the parousia, independent of the advocacy and polemical literature which currently floods and divides the evangelical community.

The approach is deliberately exegetical. I have not tried to summarize the arguments for any current position regarding the relation of the parousia-tribulation on the assumption that we must deal with Scripture itself rather than various arguments for or against a particular eschatological interpretation. I also have self-consciously anchored the paper to the three central parousia texts in order to test what they say. What they say or do not say about the relation of the parousia to the tribulation should be critical for understanding other smaller textual units. These other and smaller textual units have been

omitted not because they are unimportant, but because of space limitations. In a more comprehensive study, however, these would have to be examined in context and in relation to the three larger textual units exegeted here.

I trust the basic methodology which has guided this study makes it clear that I am trying to understand the biblical texts and message independent of contemporary controversies in the church over eschatological matters. I do not wish to participate in such controversy or to further it. I am concerned to edify the church and to encourage the community of believers to live in the hope of God's lordship over history and to live faithfully to the Lord of history.

MARK 13.1-37²

Context

Mk. 13, also known as the Olivet Discourse, is in the middle of an extensive narrative that documents Jesus' conflict with the Temple and its leaders. The narrative begins with the cleansing of the Temple (11.15-19) and concludes with the tearing of the temple veil (15.38). By locating the eschatological discourse of ch. 13 in this context, and by the recurring reference to the destruction of the Temple in the course of Jesus' passion, the writer of the Gospel points to the relationship which exists between the Temple and the death of Jesus.

Structure

A farewell address. The form of Jesus' words in Mk. 13 is that of a farewell address. As such it provides instruction and consolation for his followers just prior to his death.

A parenetic discourse (a discourse of ethical exhortation). The formal character of the farewell discourse is further defined by the parenetic (exhortative) framework and nature of the discourse. It consists of admonition supported by reference to apocalyptic events which will take place within the plan of God.

The parenetic nature of the discourse is evidenced in the following:
 1) the discourse begins and ends with exhortations to faithfulness, "take care . . ." (vv. 5, 9, 23, 33). 2) The speech pattern throughout the discourse is one called paraclesis, an exhortation in the imperative supported by a statement introduced by a conjunction. Paraclesis exhorts in the imperative and consoles

in the indicative, i.e., "take care that no one leads you astray," (exhortation in the imperative), "for many will come in my name saying . . ." (consolation in the indicative). 3) The discourse contains four temporal clauses followed by imperatives: v. 7, "when you hear . . . do not be alarmed;" v. 11, "when they bring you to trial . . . do not be anxious;" v. 14, "when you see . . . flee;" v. 21, "if anyone says to you . . . do not believe." The temporal clause plus the imperative is a common device for giving instructions regarding specific situations.

The parenetic nature of Mk. 13 indicates that the apocalyptic sayings are not an independent element of the discourse. They have been introduced to provide the supporting base for the exhortations. The apocalyptic sayings of Jesus are not the main point of the discourse. They are enunciated as developments known from the Scriptures in order that Jesus may outline the consequences for his disciples. The point of the discourse is obedience and that point is underlined by 19 imperatives in vv. 5-37. In other words, the primary function of Mk. 13 is not to disclose secret information about the future, but to promote faithfulness in the face of apocalyptic chaos and upheaval. Or, to use a still different category, Mk. 13 is a pastoral statement intended to prepare Jesus' disciples for a future period of persecution and mission.

Content

The Structure of Mk. 13. The chapter divides itself into five sections.

- 1) Vv. 1-5a contain the immediate setting and provide the introduction.
- 2) Vv. 5b-23 outline the signs that are preliminary to the parousia of the Son of Man. This section is bracketed by parallel warnings of false Christs (vv. 5-6, 21-23) which form an inclusion setting it off as a unit. The signs themselves are divided into three types: wars, earthquakes and famines (vv. 7-8), persecutions (vv. 9-13), and "the desolating sacrilege" which brings suffering in its train (vv. 14-23). Each of these paragraphs concludes with a comment on the material contained within it (vv. 8c, 13b, 23).
- 3) Vv. 24-27 offer the assurance that following the preliminary signs enumerated in vv. 5b-23, the parousia will occur. The telos (end) moment will be clear to all. There will be cosmic disturbances (vv. 24-5). The Son of Man will come in all his glory and power (v. 26) to gather together the elect from the whole world (v. 27).
- 4) Vv. 28-31 affirm the imminence of "these things."
- 5) Vv. 32-36 exhort faithfulness because the time of the end is unknown and unknowable to man.

Even this brief outline of the structure of Mk. 13 indicates clearly that this chapter is not without its inner tensions. Coupled with the repeated warnings not to assume that the signs delineated in vv. 5b-23 mean that the end is now at hand, there is the assertion that the end is "near, at the very gates" when the readers see "these things taking place" (v. 29). The statement that the end will occur in "this generation" (v. 30) is followed by the disclaimer that the time of the end is known only to God (v. 32). To complicate matters even further, the "things" mentioned in v. 29 which show the end is at hand cannot refer to the immediately preceding events recited in vv. 24-27, since these latter verses indicate that when they happen the end is not imminent, it is in fact present.

It is precisely this kind of mixed evidence that has led to many different interpretations of Mk. 13 (8 major studies in the last ten years alone). Both the nature of the evidence and the awareness of many alternative interpretations ought to make us cautious and brotherly in any reading of Mk. 13.

Jesus' Word of Imminent Destruction, vv. 1-4. Jesus' conflict with the Temple and its authorities reaches a climax in v. 2 when he predicts the destruction of the Temple. Jesus' prediction leads to the disciples' double question, "when will these things (tauta) be, and what will be the sign when all these things (tauta panta) are to be accomplished?" What is the meaning of "these things" in v. 4a and "all these things" in v. 4b? These words are reference points throughout the chapter. In v. 23, at the conclusion of the sketch of events which must precede the end, Jesus cautions, "Take care, I have told you beforehand all things." There is a correspondence between the disciples question of v. 4, "tell us when these things will be accomplished" and Jesus' response in v. 23, "I have told you all things." In vv. 29 and 30 Jesus says "when you see these things taking place, you know," but "this generation will not pass away before all these things take place."

The "these things" in 4a obviously refers to the destruction of the Temple which Jesus predicted in v. 2 and which sparked the disciples question. Does the "all these things" in 4b refer to the same, or does it have a broader reference which could include the parousia and the end of the world? Scholars are divided. The following evidence favors the broader eschatological understanding. 1) The phraseology used echoes Dan. 12.7 which states that certain events will precede God's ultimate intervention to end history. If an allusion to Dan. 12.7 is intended, this second reference indicates that the disciples understand Jesus'

prophecy regarding the Temple in an eschatological context. The destruction of the Temple will not be an isolated event, but will be part of a complex of events leading to the End. 2) The reply of Jesus to the disciples' question in vv. 5-23 suggests that there was more to the disciples' question than at first appears. The disciples want a single sign, they want to be relieved of watching. Jesus gives them a multiplicity of signs. These signs include the phenomena of false prophets pretending that the Messiah's parousia has already occurred. This answer suggests that the implied meaning of Mark's double question may be the same as the more explicit one found in Matt. 24.3, "when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

The "all things" of v. 23 obviously refer to the preceding signs which Jesus has just narrated. The "these things" in v. 29 cannot refer to the event narrated in vv. 24-7 because the parousia is the end and not a preliminary event pointing to the end. Therefore, "these things" in v. 29 refer to the signs enumerated in vv. 5-23. They provide the answer to the disciples question. The point of Jesus' answer is that these preliminary events must not be mistaken as evidence that the end has come. The events to be fulfilled within the generation of Jesus' contemporaries (all these things, v. 30) are the preliminary events only. They are the precursors of the parousia, but in themselves do not determine the time of that event.

The Signs of the End, vv. 5-23. Jesus' answer to the disciples questions outlines the signs or characteristics which mark the time before the destruction of the Temple and the end. The purpose of this part of the discourse is to discourage a false sense of imminence and to urge vigilance in the chaos and turmoil which precedes the tragic destruction of Jerusalem and the final events of history. Jesus identifies four signs. 1) The appearance of false messianic claimants. 2) The report of wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines. 3) The persecution of disciples engaged in mission. 4) The "desolating sacrilege" or "the abomination of desolation." The meaning of the first three signs is clear enough and needs no further comment in this brief exposition. But the fourth sign is problematic and requires further analysis.

Vv. 14-23 form a single unit which is controlled by the command to flee when an act of appalling sacrilege is recognized. This extended warning is connected to v. 4 by the "all things" in v. 23. It provides the most direct answer to the question of the disciples concerning the time of the Temple's destruction. Most scholars interpret these verses historically in the light of

the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in the Jewish-Roman War of 66-70. It may be, however, that this passage is not exclusively historical, but has a double meaning which mingles the historical and the eschatological. Three observations support such a reading. 1) 2 Thess. 2.3-10 identifies "the abomination of desolation" with an Antichrist figure. 2) The curious masculine hestekota, "set up," seems to favor an eschatological referent. 3) Vv. 19ff. appear to be eschatological. Is Jesus then identifying an approaching historical event, i.e. the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, with the End as the disciples seem to have done in their question, v. 4? It seems clear that Jesus brought the approaching destruction of the Temple in relation to the End, but there is also a discernible restraint which leaves room for other apocalyptic crises before the End. The historical is paradigmatic for the eschatological.

What is "the desolating sacrilege?" The phrase is mysterious and difficult to interpret. An allusion to Dan. 9.27 seems clear. That Jesus used the terminology from Daniel to warn that the appearance of the desolating sacrilege signaled the imminence of the Temple's destruction and the necessity of flight from Jerusalem also seems clear. But beyond that very little is clear. The Semitic expression used in Daniel describes an abomination so detestable it causes the Temple to be abandoned by the people of God and provokes desolation. The phrase occurs in passages dealing with the persecution and oppression of the people of God. The desecration of the Temple by Antiochus Euphianes in 168 BC was viewed by the Jews as a fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy. Jesus' use of the expression indicates that the prophecy was not fully fulfilled by that event. He warns that there will yet occur an act of profanation so appalling that the Temple will be rejected by God as the center of his glory. But the nature of the profanation is left imprecise. The use of the masculine participle, hestekota ("set up"), to modify a neuter noun, to bdelugma ("the appalling" or "the detestable") suggests that thought is being given to a personification of the abomination in some concrete figure of history. The NEB renders the meaning well: "when you see 'the abomination of desolation' usurping a place which is not his." Many scholars find this prophecy fulfilled in Titus' destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. But this interpretation does not cohere well with the subsequent demands to flee, since these suggest a time before the final disaster has occurred.

We obviously do not know the identity of "the desolating sacrilege." And two factors necessitate caution in making any identification. 1) The advice to

the reader to exercise special care in interpreting the reference ("let the reader understand") indicates that Mark himself was aware of the ambiguity of the reference. We know that many early Christians thought that the destruction of Jerusalem was a sign of the imminent return of Christ. Mark, writing probably just prior to that great disaster, inserts into the words of Jesus a word of caution to his readers (the disciples to whom Jesus spoke were hearers, not readers) that warns them against too easily identifying "the desolating sacrilege. 2) Paul's use of a similar expression in 2 Thess. 2.3 suggests that the phrase may be a reference to the coming of an eschatological Antichrist figure.

Whatever the identity of "the desolating sacrilege" Jesus point about its/his significance is clear. The appearance of "the desolating sacrilege" will precede the parousia and is a signal for flight from Jerusalem as well as special vigilance in the face of intense persecuion that will tempt many to follow false messianic pretenders. "Take heed," Jesus reminds his disciples, "I have told you all things beforehand."

The Parousia of the Son of Man, vv. 24-27. Juxtaposed to the warning that "there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation . . . until now, and never will be" and to the false messianic hopes that will lead many astray is the assurance of final redemption when the Son of Man will be manifested in power and glory. The description of the parousia consists almost entirely of OT expressions. The first phrase "in those days" is an OT phrase with distinctly eschatological connotations (see Jer. 3.16, 18; 31.29-33.15ff.; Joel 2.28; Zech. 8.23). In v. 24 this phrase designates a period subsequent to the days of sacrilege and tribulation described in vv. 14-23, but the question of chronological sequence is left imprecise. It is clear from the structure of the chapter that the parousia follows the preliminary events announced in vv. 5-23. They are the necessary precursors to the manifestation of the Son of Man, but they do not in themselves determine the exact time of the parousia.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree, vv. 28-31. Vv. 29-30 re-introduce the "these things/all these things" vocabulary, thus indicating the close relationship between vv. 4, 23 and this section. Jesus here responds to the original question of the disciples, "what will be the sign of these things" and "when will all these things be fulfilled." "These things/all these things" cannot refer to the parousia and the gathering of the elect because these events represent the end,

not preliminary signs of the end. Thus "these things/all these things" in vv. 29 and 30 refer back to vv. 5-23.

Jesus appeals to the example of the fig tree at the beginning of this section. It was a particularly appropriate example for two reasons. 1) The Mount of Olives on which Jesus was speaking was famous for its fig trees. 2) The fig tree was sprouting new growth at the time of Passover which is the time Jesus was giving the discourse. In the late spring the fig tree is softened by the sap flowing through the branches and the leaves begin to appear. It was considered a certain sign that winter was past and the warm season near. The lesson of the saying falls not on immediacy but on proximity, observes Lane. "When the fig tree becomes green, one is not only certain that summer is coming but that it is near."³ The object lesson of what was immediately at hand reinforced Jesus' exhortation to observe the significance of what was happening in Jerusalem. As certainly as the fig tree introduces summer so current Jewish hostility to him and the Roman government would lead to apocalyptic destruction.

The "when you see these things taking place" in v. 29 looks like an intentional throwback to "when you see the desolating sacrilege" in v. 14. The sacrilege of the Temple will enable the disciples to know that the destruction is imminent just like the sprouting of the fig tree indicates the imminence of summer. The profanation of the Temple will be the signal for flight from unparalleled tribulation.

V. 30 asserts that before the passing of a generation Jerusalem and the Temple be destroyed. This interpretation assumes two things. 1) All these things" refers back to the events outlined in vv. 5-23, as suggested above. 2) "This generation" refers to the contemporaries of Jesus. Nothing in the context suggests that he genea, "this generation," might refer to something else.⁴ Jesus simply asserts that the contemporary generation of disciples will see the fulfillment of his words. The disciples question is answered. Within their lifetime they witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. The time for "these things" was fulfilled. If "all these things" also has an additional future eschatological connotation, as suggested, that time is yet to come.

The Exhortation to Watchfulness, vv. 32-37. Having just announced the imminence of "these things," Jesus exhorts vigilance on the ground that no one except the Father knows the time of "that day." "That day" is a formula phrase denoting the eschatological Day of the Lord (see Amos 8.3, 9, 13; 9.11; Mic. 4.6; 5.9; 7.11; Zeph. 1.9ff.; 3.11, 16; Obad. 8; Joel 3.18; Zech. 9.16; 12-14). Here

it designates the indeterminate date of the parousia of the Son of Man.

"No one knows that day or that hour" (v. 32).

Therefore, "watch, for you do not know when the time will come" (v. 33).

"Watch therefore--for you do not know when the master of the house will come" (v. 35).

"What I say to you I say to all: Watch" (v. 37).

Jesus' word is not "calculate the time." Rather, it is "watch," "be alert."

The purpose of eschatological discourse is faithfulness, faithfulness against apostasy to false messiahs (vv. 5, 21-22), faithfulness in spite of persecution (vv. 9-13), faithfulness in the face of unparalleled tribulation (vv. 14-20).

Concluding Observation

This lengthy, and yet very brief and simplified, exposition of Mk. 13, warrants several concluding comments.

First, the most consistent theme in the discourse is the exhortation to watchfulness. That is an eternally relevant theme.

Secondly, Mk. 13 offers a double corrective. It critiques premature claims for the nearness of the parousia by pointing to certain apocalyptic events which must precede the parousia. It critiques the even greater danger of ceasing to look for the parousia by affirming that it will come soon. Mark converts any attempt to calculate the time of the end into an eschatological exhortation to be alert and faithful.

Thirdly, Jesus says apocalyptic suffering will accompany and precede the parousia. Therefore, the disciples are exhorted to pray for strength and courage to endure until the end (v. 13).

Matthean and Lukan parallels. The parallel teachings to Mk. 13 in Mt. 24-25 and Lk. 21 offer little new except to reinforce the call to faithfulness. Matthew especially stresses the theme of vigilance from 24.42 through ch. 25. Matthew, in fact, gives considerably more attention to that theme than to the material which is parallel to Mark. Matthew's obvious purpose is to encourage Christians in faithfulness and mission until the end.

I THESSALONIANS 4.13-5.11

Context

First Thessalonias is a carefully constructed letter that is divided between a thanksgiving and petition section, 1.2-4.12 and an apocalyptic disclosure and

petition section, 4.13-5.22. The parousia texts, 4.13-5.11, thus stand at the beginning of the second section of the letter, and constitute the central agenda in the apocalyptic disclosure section. In this section two apocalyptic disclosures are made: the first concerns the fate of the dead at the parousia and the second concerns the times and seasons.

The Fate of the Dead at the Parousia, 4.13-18. Paul has received word that some of the Thessalonian Christians have died and their friends are anxious regarding their status at Christ's parousia. Will their death place them at a disadvantage compared to the living? To assure and comfort these concerned Christians, Paul tells them some things about the parousia. The purpose of these words is thus comfort and hope. Paul, the pastoral-theologian, offers assurance by a theological assertion about the parousia.

The word of assurance is that the dead will accompany Christ at the parousia (v. 14b). Therefore, Christians can live in hope rather than sorrow (v. 13). This hope is grounded in the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus (v. 14a).

Vv. 15-17 further ground the hope in a word of the Lord. The central theme of Jesus' word is that Jesus himself will descend in apocalyptic splendor. At the moment of the parousia the dead will be raised and the living will be "snatched up" to a meeting with the Lord that will have no end.

Therefore, Paul exhorts, "comfort one another with these words" (v. 18).

The Times and the Seasons, 5.1-11. In addition to concerns about the status of the dead at the parousia, the Thessalonian Christians were also troubled by the delay of the parousia. They wanted to know the time when it would take place.

Paul has no instruction to give them beyond what he has taught heretofore (v. 1). They already "know accurately" (precisely in all details) the chronos, "time," and kairos, "opportunity moment," of the parousia, here designated as "the day of the Lord" (v. 2). They know it as accurately as the arrival of a thief (v. 2) or the coming of a sudden and unexpected disaster (v. 3). The irony of Paul's words are apparent. They know exactly what it is impossible to know. Therefore, they do not know.

But ignorance about the time of the parousia is no problem for Christians. Since they live in the light they can never be surprised by the thief (v. 4). "Darkness" and "light" are eschatological and ethical terms, they denote the old

age of darkness and the new age of light as well as the morality that is appropriate to each age. The two phrases "sons of the light, sons of the day" (v. 5) denote a status; this is what the Christians are. They already belong to the new age of light and sonship. Therefore, their morality should be new-age morality. Christians ought to live differently in the world than non-believers. They ought to live eschatologically because they are eschatologically transformed. The shape of eschatological morality is spelled out by Paul in vv. 6-8, and in vv. 9-10 he roots the Christian hope in God's salvation in Christ.

Paul ends this section with a sentence similar to 4.18. He exhorts the Thessalonian believers to practice mutual encouragement for the growth of the community. The End is near, but they are prepared. They ought to encourage one another to faithfulness in eschatological morality.

Concluding Observations

This second major parousia text says nothing about the tribulation of the Church.

The center piece of Paul's teaching about the parousia is the certainty that it will come and that Christians ought to live out the eschatological nature which in fact they have become in Christ. Thus, as in the case of Jesus' teaching in Mk. 13, the point of eschatology is ethical faithfulness. The parousia is coming, but no one knows when. Christians need not be concerned, however, since they already are transformed eschatologically. Their only preoccupation should be to live out what they are. Then they will be ready for the parousia.

II THESSALONIANS 2.1-12

Context

2 Thessalonians is constructed along lines similar to that of 1 Thessalonians. A thanksgiving and petition section, 1.3-12, is followed by an apocalyptic disclosure and petition section, 2.1-3.15. Again, as in 1 Thessalonians, the parousia text, 2.1-12, stands at the beginning of the apocalyptic disclosure section. It is followed by a series of petitions or exhortations that follow from the eschatological assertions.

The Problem, vv. 1-2

Paul has heard that the Thessalonian Christians are in danger of being misled by false conceptions about the parousia. The specific issue at stake is

"the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him" and the belief "that the day of the Lord has come" (vv. 1-2). Both the noun episunagoge, "our gathering together," and the word parousia are governed by same article so that both refer to the parousia of Christ. The "Day of the Lord" refers to the parousia as well. The "day of the Lord" is an OT term which describes a succession of momentous days of Yahweh moving toward a great and final Day of the Lord. The parousia would obviously be one such momentous day of the Lord.

Our understanding of the misconception involved in the statement that "the day of the Lord is present" or "has come" depends on our interpretation of what Paul refutes in vv. 3-12. There he argues that certain events are to take place before the day of the Lord comes and he depicts that Day as a public and cosmic event. Therefore, he must have understood the false teaching in Thessalonica to say that the day of the Lord had arrived already. If Paul had thought that they were saying it was imminent or at hand, he would not have argued at all. Thus, it appears that some teachers in the church were saying that the parousia had already occurred or that the day of the Lord had already begun in something they were experiencing.

The Signs Which Must Precede the Parousia, vv. 3-8

Paul responds to this teaching by summarizing what he had taught them while in their midst (v. 5). Certain events, Paul states, must be fulfilled or occur before the parousia. Paul simply alludes to these events to demonstrate that the day of the Lord has not yet come. Because he only alludes to events about which he has said more orally, and because he does not explain the language he uses, our understanding of vv. 3ff. is uncertain at best.

What seems clear is that two events will occur in association with the parousia, and these two extraordinary "happenings" will make it apparent that the final manifestation of the day of the Lord is present. The first event is he apostasia, "the apostasy." The use of the noun with the article indicates that the term is already known to the Thessalonians. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT) apostasia denotes religious rebellion against God. From the time of the Maccabean revolt (169-142 BC) the word was used to describe disloyalty to God resulting from persecution and oppression. The meaning of the term in this context is less than clear. It probably refers to an apostasy within the church, that is, a significant rebellion against the Lordship of Christ due to persecution and oppression of believers. The extent of the apostasy is not described, but it will be clear enough for Christians to identify easily.

The second event will be the revelation of "the man of lawlessness," the one opposed to the law of God (anomia) and thus the "rebellious one" against God. The name is obviously known to the Thessalonians and denotes a figure who is the catalyst for rebellion against God. In v. 9 this figure is distinguished from Satan as his tool.

The "rebellious one" is revealed (apokaluptein), a contrast to "the revelation of the Lord Jesus" (1.7). The place of his present concealment is not disclosed; apparently Paul is not interested in his present existence, but only in his appearance, character, activity and destruction (vv. 8-12). The use of the term "revelation" suggests that the "rebellious one" is more than a human figure. Paul characterizes this "rebellious one" as follows: 1) he is the son of doom, that is, he is headed for doom (apoleia) in contrast to salvation (v. 3). 2) He opposes God and proclaims himself as God (v. 4).

The "rebellious one" is often termed the Anti-Christ but Paul does not use this term. The term appears only in 1 Jn. 2.18 in the NT. But in the Johannine letters there are many anti-Christ figures whereas in 2 Thessalonians the "rebellious one" is a unique figure. Mk. 13.21 par. refers to "false Christs," as we have seen. The description of "the desolating sacrilege" in Mk. 13 is parallel to the Rebel for both appear to be involved in sacrilege and self-exaltation. The opponent of Christ in Rev. 13.17 is literally an Anti-Christ, but he is not so called there. It seems clear that there was an Anti-Christ figure in the theological thought of Jesus and the early Christians, but there was considerable diversity in the labels used to identify him and in the precise shape of his role. The NT writers say little more than that he will be the eschatological opponent of Christ. According to both Jesus and Paul he will make his appearance before the parousia.

The "rebellious one" is already at work, Paul says, but his power is restricted by the katechon ("that which restrains" here and "he who restrains" in v. 7). The present activity of rebellion is emphasized further by the assertion that "the mystery of lawlessness is already at work" (v. 7). "The mystery of lawlessness" or "rebellion" is a strange phrase with no parallels in the NT. There are many references to "mystery" in the NT, but all these refer to the revelation of previously undisclosed knowledge of God, the kingdom, Christ, or the gospel. "Mystery" here suggests that believers only know about the rebellion; it is a mystery to non-believers. In other words, the phrase does not denote "the mysterious rebellion" but rather "the secret rebellion." Just as God's plan for history is known in Christ so also is the force of evil which works against God

and his purposes. The apostasy has not yet occurred, nor has the "rebellious one" appeared but "rebellion" is now already opposing God.

The "rebellious one" would catalyze the "rebellion" now already but it/he cannot because of the katechon. But the activity of the katechon will come to an end at some time; the obstacle to the uninhibited activity of the "rebellious one" will be removed (v. 7b). Then the "rebellious one" will be revealed (v. 8).

Who or what is the katechon? The Thessalonians obviously knew. We do not know. The word is a verbal form. The verb has a wide range of meanings, e.g., "hold fast," "gain possession of," "be master of," "occupy," "prevail." It appears here as a present participle, once in the neuter (v. 6) and once in the masculine (v. 7). Both references refer to the same reality, as far as we know. The term is unique in Jewish and Christian eschatological writings; in other words, it is not used prior to or subsequent to 2 Thessalonians. It/he is now active in such a way that believers know, but there is a temporal limitation on its/his activity (vv. 7b-8). It/he stands in some relationship to the "rebellious one" and "the mystery of rebellion." That is all we know about the katechon. Everything else is speculation. The interpretations or guesses are legion as are the rebuttals for each. Any good commentary will list both the options and the problems with each one; therefore, I will not do so.

We must confess that we do not know the identity of the katechon. No interpretation is satisfactory. Therefore, we can say no more than that Paul envisages a force and/or person which is currently restricting the activity of rebellion. The activity of the katechon is coming to an end, however.

The removal of the katechon is followed immediately by the revelation of the "rebellious one." But with equal rapidity Paul introduces the next stage in the eschatological drama, the liquidation of the "rebellious one" by the Lord at his parousia. In other words, Paul pictures the parousia of Christ as coinciding with the unmasking and destruction of the "rebellious one." Christ will destroy the "rebellious one" te epiphaneia tes parousias autou, "by the manifestation of his coming."

Vv. 9-12 describe the deception of many by the "rebellious one." This description is not expounded here because of space limitations and because it adds nothing to the purpose of this study.

Exhortations to Faithfulness, 2.13-3.15

The apocalyptic disclosure of 2.1-12 is followed by a series of petitions or exhortations which are made in the light of the eschatological teaching. In

these exhortations Paul encourages faithfulness to the traditions which have been taught, mutual prayer and the discipline of Christians who have become idle because of apocalyptic fervor.

Concluding Observations

It is hard to imagine clearer language than Paul's words in 2 Thessalonians. He says explicitly that the parousia will be preceded by and/or associated with two distinct events, the apostasy and the revelation of the "rebellious one." The apostasy suggests a persecution and oppression of believers that will be so intense that many will rebel against God and forsake the Christian faith.

But it is also difficult to imagine more ambiguous language than Paul's words in 2 Thessalonians. Much of what he says was clear to his readers, but is mysterious for us. We do not know the shape of the events he describes or their sequential relationship. We make educated guesses, but no one should take such guessing too seriously. Furthermore, such guessing is hardly faithful to the intent of Paul's words. He wrote to correct error and to encourage ethical faithfulness. Let us beware lest we compound the error he corrected by saying more than we know or even more than Paul knew. Let us be faithful to his words by living "so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in us, and us in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 1.12).

Conclusions

We have examined a Jesus word and two Paul words about the parousia. There are other words to be studied, but time and space do not permit.

We have examined these three texts under the title of "The Tribulation of the Church." The real agenda for MB people in that title is the question of a pre- or post-tribulation parousia. Will the church experience apocalyptic persecution prior to the parousia or will it be spared such tribulation? I have avoided addressing that question directly so far for three reasons: 1) exegetical analysis must precede concluding syntheses. 2) The categories in the debate are misplaced. The NT does not use pre-tribulation and/or post-tribulation rapture language. It speaks rather of the certainty of the parousia and of the importance for Christians to live faithfully in anticipation of its imminent and yet indeterminate time. The least we can do in our concern to be biblical in our theology and ethics is to reject unbiblical categories of thought in favor of more biblical modes of thinking and living. 3) The NT text does not permit me to define myself as either a pre- or post-tribulationist.

Jesus and Paul, I believe, teach that the parousia will be preceded by recognizable events which will include apocalyptic persecution of Christians. What else could the words of Jesus mean: "for in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation until now, and never will be. And if the Lord had not shortened the days, no human being would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days" (Mk. 13.19-20). What else can Paul mean by his reference to an apostasy prior to the parousia due to persecution that will be so intense that many Christians will renounce Jesus as Lord?

I commend this conclusion without advocating it for three reasons: 1) I believe it is based on sound exegesis of the NT texts. 2) I believe it is consistent with the NT teaching on the suffering of the church in the world. That suffering becomes more intense as the church lives out its eschatological posture in the increasingly demonic world of the end times. 3) I believe it is imperative that the church in North America realistically face the prospect of persecution and apocalyptic tribulation. It may well be that the preoccupation with a pre-tribulation rapture among many North American evangelicals and Mennonite Brethren has produced a church that will be unprepared for the ultimate test of faithfulness, suffering for the name of Christ. We cry "Maranatha" (Lord, come quickly), and pray that the Lord's coming will spare us the ultimate test of faithfulness. But let that cry never become more than a prayer. Let it not become a firm confidence. Christ and Paul seem to teach that a path of apocalyptic suffering and tribulation separates our present experience of the Kingdom's reality and the ultimate and final experience of that Kingdom in the parousia of Christ.

If the foregoing exegesis and conclusion is correct, what does it mean pastorally for the life of the church? It calls us to exhort the church to ethical faithfulness and to prepare the church for suffering and persecution, even apocalyptic tribulation. The central thesis of this paper has been the linkage of eschatology and ethics. Jesus and Paul said the things they did in our three texts to exhort the church to ethical faithfulness, not to encourage divisiveness and unfaithfulness in brotherly relationships over the interpretation of these texts. The fundamental agenda to which these texts call us is faithfulness, faithfulness even unto death in the face of apocalyptic testing and persecution.

But ethical faithfulness and preparation for tribulation is not the bottom line. Our study of the three texts suggests some other realities which are equally significant for the life of the church. I suggest four.

1) The End already has been inaugurated in Jesus Christ. The Church of

Jesus Christ is the Eschatological Community of the End which already lives out of the resources of the End which have been moved into present history by Jesus. This Church awaits with anticipation the full and final manifestation of the End.

2) The parousia is the Christological event of the End. The center of eschatological hope in the NT is the coming again of Jesus Christ. That parousia is viewed as a historical, public and cosmic event. Humans will be aware of it and take part in it. To centralize anything else in our search for eschatological understanding is to be in error.

3) The parousia is imminent. One of the striking features of NT eschatological teaching is the emphasis on the nearness or imminence of the parousia. The consistent point of that emphasis is to exhort ethical faithfulness. Eschatology motivates ethical change and transformation. How can the teaching on imminence be reconciled with Jesus' and Paul's narration of clearly identifiable events prior to the parousia? I do not know. Jesus and the NT writers, e.g., Mark and Paul, juxtapose them without sensing a contradiction and/or tension. If they can live with such a dialectic, so can I.

4) The parousia is part of a complex of events. My study for this paper has impressed me with the wholeness of the parousia and associated events. Jesus and Paul narrate a series of eschatological events in close proximity and rapid succession. I suspect that all attempts to isolate and sequence the various "smaller events" have clouded the grandeur and magnificence of the "big event." I find myself overwhelmed in contemplation of the "big event." God will do his thing and arrange the events to fulfill his purpose in history and in the universe.

FOOTNOTES

¹ See Walvoord, The Rapture Question (Finlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1957), p. 148; and Ladd, The Blessed Hope (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 165. I am grateful to my friend and colleague, D. Edmond Hiebert, for pointing out these references to me. See his The Thessalonian Epistles (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), p. 205.

² See David Wenham, "Recent Study of Mark 13: Part 1," TSF Bulletin, 71 (Spring, 1975), 6-15, and "Recent Study of Mark 13: Part 2," TSF Bulletin, 72 (Summer, 1975), 1-9, for a good recent survey regarding the debate about a Jesus word versus a Markan work in chapter 13. It is assumed in this paper that we are dealing with a Jesus word.

³ W. L. Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 479.

⁴ See C. E. B. Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (Cambridge: The University Press, 1959), p. 409, for the options to this interpretation.

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