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“The doctrine of the return of Christ — in the Days of the Apostles”



The synopsis of a sermon preached at the Annual Kilskeery Conference by Rev. Ivan Foster in Kilskeery Free Presbyterian Church on Lord’s Day morning, 19th September 2004.

“For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you,

and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the

dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come,” 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10.

The purpose of the messages in this conference is primarily to highlight the fact that God has communicated to His people, in all ages, the truth concerning the second advent of Christ. Believers since the dawn of time have had a clear understanding of the events that will take place just before and at the return of Christ.

Progressive revelation

It is true that the degree of knowledge has increased over the ages, as God progressively revealed more concerning this glorious event, and that increased knowledge is recorded in the Holy Scriptures.

We have heard of the days of the patriarchs, of the prophets and of the teaching of the Saviour Himself during His early ministry in the conference messages preached so far. What we have heard has shown us that it is the will of God that His people be informed about the return of the Saviour. It is not just a mere acquaintance with the fact that Christ is returning, but the Lord gave His people much detailed instruction about the events surrounding the return of the Saviour. A look at the oldest reference to such teaching (Jude 14-15) will indicate this truth.

In the light of this revelation given to God’s people, we must ask: “Whence the ignorance about this subject today?” It is not God’s will that we merely hold the vaguest notions about the return of Christ. Rather, He would have us to be informed thoroughly on the matter. The agent of ignorance is the devil. Nowhere is his influence more clearly demonstrated than in the darkness that shrouds this glorious subject as far as so many Christians are concerned.

Apostles

As we turn our thoughts to the ministry of the apostles and the emphasis they place upon this doctrine, we see the same truth displayed. In the midst of all the truths that they had to set forth, this was a central doctrine.

I. THE RETURN OF CHRIST WAS A FUNDAMENTAL DOCTRINE OF APOSTOLIC THE-



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BIOLOGY

It is little wonder that the apostles place such an emphasis on this aspect of truth, since all of revelation up until their day had such an emphasis. They were required to maintain that emphasis.

1. The great commission emphasised Christ's return. "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen," Matthew 28:19-20. The word "world" would be better translated "age". This age will end with the return of the Saviour. The apostles were reminded of the end of the age and the return of Christ in His final words of commissioning to them. The Saviour's presence with His people, in its present fashion, will continue until the end of this age. Then He will come in glory and "the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever," Revelation 11:15. His presence will be with His people to a degree we can never know during this age.

2. The ascension of Christ likewise laid emphasis upon His return. "And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven," Acts 1:9-11. The distress the apostles were feeling as they witnessed the departure of the Saviour was, at least in part, alleviated by the angels emphasising His return in like manner. There was, in a fashion, a rehearsal of the Saviour's return seen in His ascension. The cloud that received Him, the angels that were there, the place from which He departed, the Mount of Olives: all these will feature in the return of Christ. (Zechariah 14:4, Matthew 25:31, Revelation 1:7.) What a reminder of the Saviour's return was presented in the features that surrounded His ascension to His Father!

3. There was an emphasis upon this truth in the preaching of the apostles. The first sermon preached by the apostle Peter on the Day of Pentecost, a sermon preached in the power of the Holy Spirit if ever a sermon was preached in His power, emphasised the return of Christ. It was one of the first truths mentioned by Peter.

Text

His text, as it were, was from a prophecy of the second coming by Joel. Look at Acts 2:16-21. "But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; and it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams: and on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy: and I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke: the sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that great and notable day of the Lord come: and it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved," Acts 2:16-21 (cp. Joel 2:28-32). This is clear reference to the return of Christ in



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that great sermon.

Second sermon

Peter's second sermon, Acts 3:20-21, likewise refers to the second advent of Christ. "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; and he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began."

4. It is emphasised in the writings of the apostles. I cannot possibly quote all the references to Christ's return that are found in the epistles, but I will give you the most prominent references. Romans 11:25-27; 1 Cor 15:50-57; 2 Cor 5:10-11; Gal 5:5, 6:7-9; 5:26-27; Phil 1:6, 3:20, Col 3:4; 1 Thess 1:10, 2:19-20, 3:13, 4:13-18, 5:2-4, 23; 2 Thess 2; 1 Tim 6:14; 2 Tim 1:12, 4:1, 8; Titus 2:13; Heb 9:28; 10:25; James 5:7-8; 1 Pet 5:4; 2 Pet 3:9-14; 1 John 3:2-3; Jude 14-15, 21, 24-25; the whole of the book of the Revelation. Those who would claim to follow in the footsteps of the apostles and call their doctrine apostolic must show a similar emphasis, as did they of this subject. Even when under duress, this doctrine was taught by the apostles. Consider Acts 17:1-10, where Paul's ministry in Thessalonica is recorded. Note particularly that he spent only "three sabbath days" preaching for, in verse 10, we read that he left the city because of trouble and persecution against the gospel. "And the brethren immediately sent away Paul." He could have spent no more than twenty-six days teaching the Thessalonian converts. Yet, despite this handicap we read what he said of their knowledge of the doctrine of Christ. "But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. . . . But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief, . . . let us watch and be sober," 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6. 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10 likewise illustrates what they were taught in that short period.

Difficult

Even in the difficult times in Thessalonica, the doctrine of the return of Christ and the events surrounding it were deemed of such importance that, even under threat of persecution, Paul did not leave that matter aside.

II. THERE WAS AN EMPHASIS PLACED UPON THIS DOCTRINE FOR IT IS A CHIEF MEANS OF PROMOTING HOLINESS

The disposition of the believers in the days of the apostles was of those "waiting" for Christ. "Ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come," 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10. Elsewhere, the sanctifying influence of a proper teaching of this doctrine is set forth. "Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him



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in peace, without spot, and blameless," 2 Peter 3:11-14. "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure," 1 John 3:2-3. "And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming," 1 John 2:28. "Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world," 1 John 4:17. "That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ," 1 Timothy 6:14. "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing," 2 Timothy 4:8.

III. THOUGH THE EARLY BELIEVERS WERE WELL ACQUAINTED WITH THE LONG INTERVAL BEFORE CHRIST WOULD RETURN, THEY OBSERVED THE INDICATIONS THAT SIGNALLED THE APPROACH OF THAT DAY IN THE INCREASING WICKEDNESS ALL AROUND

It is utterly wrong to suggest that the early Christians were taught to expect Christ's return at "any moment." They knew that many things had to take place first. "And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. . . . And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come. When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:) then let them which be in Judaea flee Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory," Matthew 24:4-8; 14-16; 29-30. Significant and specific events have to take place before Christ will return and for these the child of God must watch and thus observe the nearing of Christ's return. Paul underlined the same truth to those who had been deceived into expecting the return of the Saviour in the early days of this age. "Now we beseech you, brethren, by (or concerning) the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by (or concerning) our gathering together unto him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition," 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3.

Departures

If we were ever to bear in mind the return of Christ then we would see the theological departures and the tampering with the Word of God and His ordinances, as evidences of the



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approach of that "Day". We would reject utterly any involvement in these changes. As it is, many believers have forgotten the truth of Christ's return and consequently are easily persuaded to "meddle with change" (Proverbs 24:21). It is this that Christ spoke of in Matthew 25:1-5. "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept." The absence of any sense of the return of Christ and the increasing evidence of the apostasy that is to take place before His return, have induced sleep and carelessness amongst God's people. Heed Paul's word. "The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light," Romans 13:12.