

Itching Ears

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There are few things more destructive to the development of a godly Christian life than the promotion of rumors, speculations, myths or lies. Time and time again in history rumors, lies or seemingly harmless speculations have led to gross perversions of Christian principles and many times to the destruction of lives on a mass scale. The truth is not something to be played with according to one's own changing preferences and tastes. It is something to be sought for honestly, upheld bravely and promulgated in humility. Paul spoke directly to this need to search out and jealously guard the truth:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (II Tim. 2:15).

Although this verse is very familiar to many people in the fundamentalist and evangelical traditions (usually in its KJV form "rightly-dividing the word of truth") not all seem to realize the incredible harm and injury that can be done by not strictly adhering to it as a principle. If there is one thing above all else that should be a fundamental principle of biblical study (and biblical application!) it is *honesty tempered with humility*. Over the centuries literally millions of people's lives have been affected by erroneous teaching and often times vicious applications of biblical "truth." This has been true not only within the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions but also in the Protestant churches of the reformation and the many denominations and groupings that have sprung from them down to this century. The massacres of the crusades, the tortures of the inquisition, the countless pogroms of the Jews throughout history, the fascism of Nazi propaganda and South African apartheid have all sought support for their philosophies and actions in the pages of scripture. Anyone who doubts that such a thing still exists need look no farther than the wholesale "ethnic cleansing" performed by "Christian" ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia as well as similar situations in regional wars of the former Soviet Union. In each of

these cases appeal is made to a scriptural basis for fanatical beliefs held and murderous actions perpetrated.

Today, as throughout the last two thousand years, the Christian world abounds in conspiracy theories and apocalyptic scenarios revolving around the second coming of Christ. Often these scenarios come complete with date-setting (e.g. a well known international cable news station proclaims 2007 as the "probable" date) in direct contradiction of plain and obvious statements by Jesus and the apostles (Matt. 24:36; Acts 1:7).

Each of the many authors, preachers or groups who take such positions claim to see the fulfillment of predicted biblical "end-time" signs in the current events of today. Apparently this is done in ignorance (or disparagement) of the fact that generation upon generation of other Christian believers have done the very same thing in almost every century since the time of Christ - only to be disappointed - sometimes with devastating mental, emotional, spiritual, material or even physical consequences to themselves or to others.

Let it be plainly said: Christian believers, especially leaders, have a grave responsibility before God to live lives that are "self-controlled, upright and godly in this present age while we wait for the blessed hope ..." (Titus 2:12-13). Each of us will one day "give account of ourselves to God" and this "accounting" will include, among other things, "every idle word" we may speak (Rom. 14:12; Matt. 12:36). The qualities of self-control, uprightness and godliness should be in our *thinking*, our *actions* and our *speech*. We, of all people, should not be "blown here and there" (Eph. 4:14-15) by the latest "prophecy, report or letter" promoting the idea "that the day of the Lord is at hand" (2 Thess. 2:1-2). Nor should we allow ourselves to "be deceived" by other "distortions of truth" (Acts 20:30-31) concerning *any* matter - especially when *authority is claimed* on the basis of special "spiritual insight," "revelation," "Jesus," or "an angel, told me," or like unproveable sources (I Thess. 5:21-22).

The Apostle Paul showed great concern about the harm to people's lives caused by such speculations, distortions and erroneous teachings. In speaking to Timothy he commanded:

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work - which is by faith (1 Tim. 1:3-4)

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge:

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction.

For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.

They will turn away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry (2 Tim. 4:1-5).

Obviously, there is a grave responsibility for those who teach the scriptures to accurately present "the word of truth" to others. There is also a responsibility to do this with humility and with a sincere willingness to change when one finds that one is wrong - in part or in whole. But perhaps, above all, we must all learn to *separate speculation from solid biblical evidence* and to designate speculation clearly as such. We should also be willing to honestly say we don't know the answer to certain sections of scripture and to present our understanding of particular topics as "possibilities" rather than "certainties" in areas of disagreement or uncertainty. In short, we need to follow the Bereans' example and "to search the scriptures to see if these things are so" - no matter who teaches them (Acts 17:11). If the Bereans were right to do this with what the great apostle Paul taught should you or I be offended when people do the same with what we teach or write?! The answer is, of course, obvious.

When Will the Kingdom Come?

Any discussion of the timing of the second coming of Christ must keep firmly in mind that from the biblical perspective, God's coming kingdom has *already* been inaugurated by the first coming of Christ and by the giving of the "firstfruits of the Spirit" to every believer in Christ (Rom. 14:17). From the biblical perspective the whole period of time (however long it may prove to be) from Christ's resurrection and the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost until his future return is "the last days" (Acts 2:17; cf. I Cor. 10:11). During this time of "the last days" Christian believers have a clear mission which should govern their thoughts, words and deeds:

It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7-8).

However long or however short the time may prove to be before our Lord's return the Christian mission and responsibility is the same. It is not altered by world events of a religious, political, economic or cosmic nature (nor, I might add, does expertise in the Bible automatically make one an "instant expert" in such fields as history, economics, politics, etc.). Instead, the mission and responsibility of the church is *always* the same because this time period is, in a very special sense, the "day of salvation" - the time when the salvation accomplished through Christ's first coming is now being offered to the world. For those who accept this salvation the blessings of God's future kingdom have *already* begun!

E. Earle Edwards speaks directly to this issue in his book *Pauline Theology* (Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 5-14:

The Old Testament prophets predicted the "last" days or latter days in which God would accomplish the final redemption of his people and the destruction of their enemies. Later "apocalyptic" writings emphasized that this last or "eschatological" redemption would be "revealed" by God at his sovereign pleasure and would encompass not only the nation but the whole created order. They interpreted the redemption in terms of both a

continuity and a catastrophic discontinuity between the present age and the new cosmic creation, that is, the coming age of the kingdom of God ...

In the teaching of Jesus the arrival of the kingdom is said to take place in two stages. The first had already appeared in his ministry and was to be revealed shortly [with the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost] in an even greater degree in the midst of the present age. The second stage, the arrival of the kingdom in universal judgment and final redemption, was reserved for Jesus' future second coming, his parousia as the glorious Son of man.

The coming of the kingdom of God in the resurrection of Jesus and in the activity of the Holy Spirit in the church *effectively diminished the importance of the precise time of its final consummation.* While the "delay of the parousia" was a problem for early twentieth century Christian scholars, there is little if any evidence that it was a significant problem for the early church. From the beginning Paul considered the parousia expectation to be equally relevant for believers who were alive and for those who had fallen asleep in death ...

In Pauline perspective, the transition from death to resurrection is equivalent to the transition from non-being to being (Rom. 4:17); thus, for the unconscious dead the parousia of Jesus Christ is immediately imminent, only one moment into the future, and thus for the living that moment is never very far (chronologically!) into the future. Living in the imminence of Christ's return is, therefore, the privilege and the proper stance toward life of every generation of Christians.

Who is "Spiritual"? Who is "Greatest"?

Who then is "spiritual" or who is "greatest" in the kingdom of God? Is it those who have attained to some deep spiritual "wisdom" or "insight"? Is it those who have finally unlocked the mysteries of angels, spiritual manifestations or the spiritual world? The biblical answer to this question is plain through-out the New Testament. Jesus himself stated it in the simplest of terms in response to the request of James and John to sit at his right and left hand in the glory of his kingdom.

...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of man did not

come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45).

It is clear from such statements that when the Bible speaks of the "mature" or the "grown-up" amongst Christians it is speaking primarily of those Christian believers whose lives reflect a humble and selfless life of Christ-like love and service to others. It is *not* speaking of those who are supposedly "initiated" into some deep, hidden secrets that only the "super-spiritual" can understand. This is confirmed in I Corinthians 3:1-4:

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly - mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not yet ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul, and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not men?

Paul is speaking here to Christians - people who have the Spirit of God and who, indeed, are "the temple of the holy Spirit" which dwells in them (I Cor. 6:19). And yet he uses the adjective "spiritual" not to describe those who are tapped into hidden spiritual secrets or those who are "experts" in spiritual manifestations. Instead, he addresses as "spiritual" those Christian believers who by virtue of disciplined renewed mind living have cultivated and produced the "fruit of the Spirit" in their lives. The spiritually "mature" in Christ are the same as the "greatest" in the kingdom of God - they are the ones who like Christ "take up their cross daily," laying down their lives as "a living sacrifice" in the light of spreading and living the gospel message (Rom. 12:1-2).

It was in interaction with this Corinthian church that Paul confronted a group of believers who thought that they were indeed "super-spiritual" - so much so that G.E. Ladd says they "claimed access to a wisdom that secured a perfected salvation ... and a quality spirituality ... that led to utter indifference to the flesh." As Ladd continues:

This esoteric knowledge led to a haughty indifference to the scruples of the unenlightened (I Cor. 8:1). The

deliverance from the flesh expressed itself in two different ways, both by indulgence and denial. "All things are lawful to me" (I Cor. 6:12) expressed the freedom of these pneumatikoi ["spirituals"]; and, as the context clearly shows, this freedom was understood to allow unhampered indulgence of bodily appetites, including sexual abuses...

But Paul would entertain no such "spirituality." For him the message of the cross was the supreme wisdom of God. To understand its meaning and significance was to understand "the wisdom of God in a mystery." There was no "higher truth" beyond

that. In short, in the NT the "spiritual" or the "mature" are

not an esoteric circle initiated into special inner secrets of spiritual truth; they are simply mature believers who understand the meaning of the cross and live consistently with this truth ... (A *Theology of the NT*, p. 422-423).

[For an excellent study of these subjects I highly recommend Gordon Fee's *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* in *The New International Commentary of the New Testament* series published by Eerdmans]