

Response

by

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Dr Truesdale sets out very clearly two suggested interpretations of the eschatological hope found in the New Testament. What he designates the *maximalist* view sees the whole of God's creation waiting for the final triumph of the kingdom of God. Over against this optimistic interpretation is the *minimalist* approach, concluding that the world and everything in it, including the human race, faces impending judgement. Before that happens, the Church must save as many souls as possible, fearing that at an unknown moment, the sudden and dramatic return of Christ will 'rapture' all the Christians and leave the rest to face God's fiery judgement. These two views are said to compete with one another and Christian theologians have not been able to resolve the tension between them. This tension has allegedly marked the history and mission of the Church of the Nazarene, with the more optimistic view prevailing in her earlier years and the more pessimistic interpretation appealing widely in more recent years.

Truesdale's paper prompts two responses, one biblical and the other theological. First, it is claimed that scriptures like Romans 8:18-21 and Colossians 1:15-17, express the great hope about the ultimate liberation of the whole creation. There is an 'eager anticipation' for the 'sons of God to be revealed.' This prophetic panorama, however, is only a *part* of Paul's full teaching on 'last things.' He instructs the Thessalonians about 'the coming of the Lord,' the archangel's call, the trumpet of God, and the resurrection of 'the dead in Christ' (1 Thess. 4:15-17). He further instructs them concerning how the Lord Jesus will be 'revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire...' (2 Thess. 1:7-10). In greater detail he writes to the Corinthian Christians concerning the 'mystery' that will unfold for all the people of God. The 'last trumpet' will sound, the dead will be raised and 'we shall be changed' (1 Cor. 15:51-58). In a similar vein he instructs Titus on how Christians are waiting for 'the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ' (Tit.2: 13).

These Pauline passages, and similar teachings elsewhere in the New Testament, present a scenario for 'the day of the Lord' that is to come. Putting all these scriptures together in a way that gives us a unified, coherent and exegetically defensible exposition of 'the last things,' is a challenge to biblical scholarship we must attempt. As with the other great doctrines of Scripture, we proceed with the careful examination of all the relevant material, assisted with the best tools at our disposal, and always relying on the Spirit of truth. After all, the scriptures were given 'for our instruction' (Rom. 15:4), and that includes these New Testament texts on 'the day of the Lord.' Truesdale succeeds in 'sending up' some of the more bizarre interpretations of New Testament prophecy which depict a translation of Christians out of the coming judgement without even 'the smell of smoke' clinging to them! But we should not neglect the sincere study of these eschatological passages just because the Hal Lindsay type of dispensational exegesis treats Scripture like a jigsaw puzzle. In preaching and teaching and personal discipleship, the 'glorious hope' is a vital part of the great salvation.

Now for the theological consideration. Our Wesleyan-Arminian theology gives a large place to hope. In recent years this theology has been described as ‘the optimism of grace.’ It declares that God loved the world and Christ died for all. A consequence of his atonement is prevenient grace, meaning that the Holy Spirit is active in the hearts of men and women everywhere. This theology of hope not only constrains us to preach the good news that God wills not the death of the sinner but moves us also to work for the good of our neighbour.

John Wesley himself set us an example here. He could write to his brother Charles, saying, ‘We have nothing to do but save souls,’ and he worked at that every day for half a century. Alongside that amazing ministry of soul saving and building up the Church of God, he also wrote and preached and argued against the most conspicuous example of entrenched societal evil in 18th Century England – slavery.

The New Testament makes it plain that all the institutions in the world, that is, all the works of human hands, will stand under the judgement of God, as well as ‘all men everywhere.’ But our pilgrimage in the world is not some kind of individualistic escape mechanism. We are here to work and labour and proclaim the everlasting love of God. Yes, the gospel gives us glorious hope for the world to come, but it also moves us to spend and be spent for our others in this world – now! Paul illustrates this tension so clearly in 2 Corinthians 5. On one hand, ‘the fear of the Lord,’ that is, the judgement to come, incites us to ‘persuade men.’ On the other hand, ‘the love of Christ controls us because we are convinced that one has died for all’ (vv. 11-15).

So our Christian hope is twofold. There is the motivating energy of knowing that in serving Christ we will have a part in saving the lost, helping to oppose all kinds of evil and establishing a kingdom of love and justice in our world. But no less important is the hope that all human history will eventually find its climax in that day when ‘the kingdom of the world’ will become ‘the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever’ (Rev. 11:15). The knowledge of God will yet cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

As a Church in the Wesleyan tradition, the Church of the Nazarene, at the beginning of the 21st Century, in every world area, would do well to follow the practical advice of our father-in-God, John Wesley. ‘Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.’