

Jesus' Eschatological Legacy: The Tension Between the Nearness of the Second Coming and the Mission of the Church

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Jesus announced His return as imminent (Matt 10:23; 16:28; Mark 1:15; 9:1; Luke 21:31-32; cf. Matt 24:42-44; 25:1-13; Mark 13:33-37; Luke 12:35-38; 21:34-36), and so it was expected by the early believers (Acts 3:19-21; Rom 13:11; 1 Cor 7:29-30; 15:51-58; 16:22; 1 Thess 4:15-18; Heb 10:25, 37; Jas 5:8; 1 Pet 4:17). On the other hand, He also left the disciples a worldwide mission (Matt 24:14; 26:13; Mark 13:10; Acts 1:8; cf. Rev 14:6), which requires time, and two thousand years later it seems that the church is still quite far from finishing it. This apparent contradiction has intrigued a number of scholars, and several solutions have been offered throughout the years. One of such solutions, which greatly affects the interpretation of Luke-Acts, goes as far as to suggest that the disciples' mission was fabricated by Luke with no other purpose than to solve the issue of the delayed Parousia. The idea is that the adjournment of the eschatological hope had become such a major source of anxiety for the church that Luke decided to provide a definitive answer for it: he abandoned altogether the belief in Jesus' soon return and, by envisioning the church's world mission, pushed the final consummation into the distant future. In so doing, he devised a third phase in sacred history, one that was not originally within Jesus' eschatological horizons: the period of the church; the other two being the OT period and the ministry of Jesus.¹ Though this particular

* This essay was presented at the Fourth International Bible Conference, organized

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reconstruction has been severely criticized,² the difficulty to reconcile the promise of an imminent return with the church's mission remains. This essay is not intended to assess the issue of Luke's eschatology and the debate around it.³ Instead, it will argue that, though Luke does admit a delayed fulfillment of the church's expectation associated with the preaching of the gospel, he has not done away with the idea of an imminent end, and that the tension between both concepts goes back to Jesus Himself—it seems to have been deliberately conceived to keep the church healthy and functional. Much of the discussion will hinge on Acts 1:6-8.

The Restoration of Israel

As a sequel to Luke, Acts begins by recounting Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to the disciples, in which He continued to instruct them on the same subject He had mostly occupied Himself with

by the Biblical Research Institute in Rome, June 11-21, 2018.

¹ This idea is linked primarily with Hans Conzelmann, *Die Mitte der Zeit*, BHT (Tübingen: Mohr, 1954), 87-127; English translation, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

² E.g., Robert Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 100-157; Beverly R. Gaventa, "The Eschatology of Luke-Acts Revisited," *Encounter* 43:1 (1982): 27-42; W. Ward Gasque, *A History of the Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1989), 286-297; E. Early Ellis, *Christ and the Future in New Testament History* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2001), 120-146.

³ For recent discussions, see Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, BTNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012); I. Howard Marshall, "Political and Eschatological Language in Luke," in *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, Joel B. Green, and Anthony C. Thiselton, SH 6 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 157-177; Steve Walton, "Acts: Many Questions, Many Answers," in *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, ed. Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 229-250; Heikki Räisänen, "The Redemption of Israel: A Salvation-Historical Problem in Luke-Acts," in *Challenges to Biblical Interpretation: Collected Essays 1991-2001*, BIS 59 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 61-81; Richard Bauckham, "The Restoration of Israel in Luke-Acts," in *Restoration: Old Testament, Jewish and Christian Perspectives*, ed. James M. Scott, JSJSup 72 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 435-487; Anders E. Nielsen, *Until it is Fulfilled: Lukan Eschatology according to Luke 22 and Acts 2*, WUNT 126 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000); John T. Carroll, "The Parousia of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts," in *The Return of Jesus in Early Christianity*, ed. John T. Carroll (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 5-45; Michael Wolter, "Israel's Future and the Delay of the Parousia, according to Luke," in *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel: Luke's Narrative Claim upon Israel's Legacy*, ed. David P. Moessner, vol. 1 of *Luke the Interpreter of Israel*, ed. David P. Moessner and David L. Tiede (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1999), 307-324; Jacob Jervell, *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles*, NTT (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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during His ministry—the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3; cf. Matt 4:17, 23). It is shortly after this information that Luke records the disciples' question to Jesus: "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (vs. 6, *NASB*). When taken at face value, this question would seem to have arisen out of Jesus' teaching mentioned in vs. 3, but it seems preferable to consider it as the very situation which prompted the actions described in that verse. In other words, vs. 3—together with vss. 4-5—would only represent Luke's introductory review of what Jesus taught in response to the disciples' inquiry about the kingdom and its restoration mentioned in vs. 6.⁴ The double references to the ascension (vss. 2, 9) and to the coming of the Spirit (vss. 4-5, 8) lend strong support to this view. It is hard to see how even on the ascension day the disciples would still make such a misguided question (cf. Luke 24:44-46).⁵ The most natural context for their query in vs. 6, therefore, would seem to be the resurrection of Jesus, rather than the ascension or the circumstances that happened forty days later as we have now. In this case, vss. 6-11 would just be another example of Luke's several resumptive block narratives with loose chronological connection with the events mentioned nearby (e.g., Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 9:31; 11:19-26, 27-30).

At any rate, the disciples' question indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of God's kingdom and, by extension, of Jesus and His work. This is even clearer in the Emmaus episode recorded in the gospel (Luke 24:13-32). Simply put, the kingdom of God—or of heaven—is God's sovereign rule in the universe and, in the preaching of Jesus, must be seen in the context of salvation history and His approaching death on the cross.⁶ From such perspective, Jesus came not

⁴ It is hardly open to question that the events described in Acts 1:6-7 are prior to the ones mentioned in Luke 24:44-47, and that Acts 1:3-5 is nothing more than a brief summary of what can be found in both passages. In fact, in the preface of Acts (1:1-5) Luke only follows the practice of ancient writers—though with some degree of liberty—of starting the second volume with a kind of recapitulation of the end of the first. See Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012-2015), 1:646-649.

⁵ There are those, however, who believe exactly that. E.g., David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 108.

⁶ On Jesus' announcement of the kingdom, see George E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 105-121; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 71-146; J. Ramsey Michaels, "The Kingdom of God and the Historical Jesus," in *The Kingdom of God in 20th Century Interpretation*, ed. Wendell Willis (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 109-118; George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New*

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only to rescue the descendants of Adam from the condemnation of sin but also to vindicate God, and so to restore His moral dominion over the created world (cf. John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 17:4-5; 1 Cor 15:25-27; Eph 1:19-23; Col 2:13-15; Phil 2:5-11; Rev 12:7-10). This is why Jesus' favorite message from the outset of His ministry was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 4:17).⁷ That this emphasis had already been anticipated by John the Baptist (Matt 3:2) reinforces the salvation-history meaning of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom.⁸

In the OT times, Israel's election and setting aside as a holy nation (Exod 19:5-6) did not necessarily conflict with the notion of a divine, spiritual kingdom because of the strong focus on monotheism and the universality of God's rule (2 Kgs 19:19; 1 Chr 16:31; Ps 47:8; Isa 37:20; 45:14). The first serious challenge to Israel's theocracy came with the establishment of the royal line, first with Saul and then with David and his heirs.⁹ Notwithstanding, it was not until the Babylonian captivity and the several foreign occupations of Judah following it that apocalyptic ideas linking together the reign of God and the restoration of the monarchy really began to emerge.¹⁰ By the time of Jesus, the hope of political deliverance by the messianic king had become widely prevalent among the Jews (Mark 10:35-37; Luke 9:46; 19:11; 24:21; John 6:14-15; 12:34; cf. Tob 13:15-16; *Pss. Sol.* 17:21-46; *As. Mos.* 10:7-9; 2 *Bar.* 40:2-4; 73:1). In fact, this became "the pathology of Judaism," as John Bright says.¹¹ This explains the disciples' bewilderment at Jesus' death. Despite their strong commitment to Him as the promised Messiah (Luke 5:11, 28; 6:12-16; cf. Matt 16:16; John 1:41, 45; 2:11; 6:68-69), they did

Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), esp. 54-78; Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 561-593; Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 41-79; Clinton E. Arnold, "The Kingdom, Miracles, Satan, and Demons," in *The Kingdom of God*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 153-178.

⁷ Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture references in this essay are from the *ESV*.

⁸ On the continuity between John's and Jesus' presentation of God's kingdom, see Dale C. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 206-208, 210.

⁹ See the still relevant discussion by John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953; reprint, 1981), 17-44. For the concept of God's kingdom in the OT, see Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2006), 275-324.

¹⁰ Bright, 156-186.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

not expect Him to die, but to stand up as a military leader, One who would drive the Romans out of the land, reinstate David's dynasty, and restore Israel to its past glory. Such conviction, buttressed by Jesus' promise that they would sit on thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28), whatever He meant by this,¹² even made them to yearn for particular privileges in the restored kingdom (Mark 10:35-37; Luke 9:46; cf. Matt 20:20-21). So, when He died all their political and personal dreams were completely shattered (Luke 24:19-21). Yet, when He resurrected, such dreams also came back to life and seem to have been raised to an unprecedented level (cf. vss. 33-35). It was natural to conceive the resurrection as a strong indication that the long-awaited messianic kingdom would finally be established, hence their question whether that was the time Jesus would do it (Acts 1:6).¹³

Jesus' evasive answer that follows is often taken as an indirect denial that the kingdom would come "at this time," and so as an expression of the delay of the Parousia. In fact, it seems to be exactly the opposite: Jesus left the issue of time unsettled, thus creating an open expectation, rather than pushing the final consummation into the distant future. He did not reject the premise behind the disciples' question of an imminent kingdom, neither did He accept it. He only reminded them that the time of God's actions belongs to God Himself and, as such, is inaccessible to humans (Acts 1:7). It was in such a context that He must have explained to them once again the real nature of His messianic mission (Luke 24:25-27, 44-47) and of God's kingdom (Acts 1:3). They were familiar with the prophecies (Luke 24:25), but their minds had been formatted to think of

¹² This saying of Jesus (cf. Luke 22:28-30) has been traditionally interpreted ecclesialogically: as twelve were the patriarchs of Israel, so twelve were the disciples and founders of the church (cf. Eph 2:20; Rev 21:12-14). Within the context of first-century Jewish eschatology, however, this could be understood in connection to the ingathering and restoration of all Israel at the end of time (cf. Deut 30:3-4; Zech 8:7-8; Bar 5:5; *Pss. Sol.* 11:1-9). See Karen J. Wenell, *Jesus and Land: Sacred and Social Space in Second Temple Judaism*, LNTS 334 (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 104-138.

¹³ It is worth noting that in some contemporary Jewish traditions the resurrection was an eschatological act in which God would bring the righteous dead back to life and inaugurate the age to come (*Wis* 5:13-14; *1 En.* 46:6; 51:1-2; *Pss. Sol.* 3:11-16; 13:9-11; 14:4-10; *4 Ezra* 7:32-37; *2 Bar.* 49:1-51:16; *b. Sanh.* 90b; *b. Ketub.* 111b; cf. Luke 14:13-14; 20:34-36; John 5:28-29; 11:23-24). The fact that, when Jesus resurrected, many saints that were in their graves resurrected with Him (Matt 27:51-53) could easily be taken as an indication that the messianic age had indeed arrived. On the meaning of resurrection in Second Temple Judaism, see N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, vol. 3 of *Christian Origins the Question of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 146-206.

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the Messiah as an earthly ruler. But, now they were able to have a fresh understanding of what the prophets wrote (vs. 45-46), for they could see it under a new light, a light that was shed from the empty tomb (cf. Acts 2:22-24, 32, 36; 3:18-26; 4:10, 33; 5:30-31).¹⁴

The Mission of the Church

According to Luke's narrative, what came next in Jesus' final interactions with the disciples were His instructions as to the ultimate purpose of their calling (Acts 1:8). In the dynamics of Acts 1, the emphasis behind such instructions is clear: instead of indulging in chronological speculations about the messianic kingdom (vss. 6-7), the disciples were to bear witness to Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to "the ends of the earth," an expression taken from Isa 49:6 that simply means "the whole world" (cf. Luke 24:47; Acts 13:47).¹⁵

Two points here deserve clarification. The first is the origin of the disciples' mission. To argue that such a mission represents Luke's creative attempt to cope with the delayed Parousia is to ignore the biblical concept of redemptive history and the part Israel itself was to play in it. When God called Abraham, He set in operation a plan so that His saving blessings could eventually reach all the nations (Gen 12:2-3; 18:18; 22:18; cf. 26:4; 28:14). His covenant with the patriarch has properly been defined as "the sovereign administration of grace and promise" through which He elected Israel for Himself and conferred them a series of privileges, such as the multiplication of their seed, the gift of the land, and His own protective presence in order to enable them to be a channel of His blessings to the entire world.¹⁶ Jesus Himself recognized this (Matt 8:11; Mark 11:17; cf. Isa 56:7), so when He spoke of the worldwide proclamation of the gospel (Matt 24:14; 28:19-20; Mark 13:10; Luke 24:47; cf. 2:30-32), He was not introducing a new concept so to speak, but only anticipating the ultimate fulfillment of the purpose of Abraham's call (Matt 8:11; cf. Gal 3:6-9).¹⁷

¹⁴ See also Wilson Paroschi, *The Book of Acts* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2018), 11-14.

¹⁵ Robert C. Tannehill, *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 of *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 17.

¹⁶ Willen A. VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption: From Creation to the New Jerusalem* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 107, 129.

¹⁷ A recurrent argument is that, instead of advocating a mission to the Gentiles, Jesus was thinking only on Diaspora Jews (e.g., E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1985], 220; Allison, 186). For analysis of this position, see

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The second point relates to the orientation of the disciples' mission, which involved a significant shift in relation to God's original plan for Israel. In the OT times, Israel was expected to go out and witness about God among all the nations (Isa 42:6; 49:6; cf. Ps 67:1-7; 96:3-10; 98:2-3; Isa 42:1, 4; 45:6; 66:19; Jonah 1:1-2)¹⁸ as much as to attract the nations to God, as evidenced by Solomon's temple dedicatory prayer of 1 Kgs 8:41-43 and Ps 66:5: "Come and see what God has done." And, because of the theocratic nature of Israel's government and corporate character, this centripetal (inward-oriented) witnessing was the most emblematic aspect of Israel's mission, the one that best summarizes its purpose as a chosen nation (Ps 22:27; Isa 2:2-4; 42:6-7; 49:6-7; 56:6-8; 60:1-14; 66:18; Mic 4:1-3; 7:12; Zeph 3:9-10; Zech 14:16; cf. Tob 13:11; *T. Ben.* 9:2; *Pss. Sol.* 17:33-35; *Sib. Or.* 3.702-718, 772-776). That Jesus also evoked such centripetal movement (Luke 13:29)¹⁹ only underscores that this was indeed God's big project for Israel (cf. Isa 66:22-23), which in turn explains the primary scope of His own mission (Matt 15:24; cf. 10:5-7).²⁰ Now, however, a different strategy was required. By renouncing theocracy and putting Jesus to death (John 19:14-15), national Israel would no longer be the agent through which God's salvation would be conveyed to the world. The messengers would be those who accepted Jesus, irrespective of their ethnicity (cf. 1 Pet 2:9-10). And, though Jerusalem was still the center, the disciples were not expected to stay and build roots there, but to move out to the uttermost ends of the earth.

Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 269-270, and esp. Michael Bird, "Who Comes from the East and the West? Luke 13:28-29/Matt 8:11-12 and the Historical Jesus," *NTS* 52 (2006): 441-457.

¹⁸ See Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations*, 2^d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012); Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

¹⁹ Though not explicitly mentioned in the text (Luke 13:28-29; cf. Matt 8:11-12), Allison (51) highlights that the presumed destination of those people's movement was Judea, more specifically Jerusalem, which Jews imagined to be the *axis mundi* (Ezek 5:5; 38:12; *1 En.* 26:1; *Jub.* 8:9; *Sib. Or.* 5:250; *b. Sanh.* 37a). See discussion by Philip S. Alexander, "Jerusalem as the *Omphalos* of the World: On the History of a Geographical Concept," in *Jerusalem: Its Sanctity and Centrality to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Lee I. Levine (New York, NY: Continuum, 1999), 104-119.

²⁰ See Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Christology* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 1999), 43.

The Early Church's Sense of Urgency

Going back to Jesus' dialogue with the disciples in Acts 1:6-7, by not explicitly contradicting the assumption of nearness embedded in the question, Jesus could be understood as reaffirming it, the only conditions being the coming of the Spirit and the preaching of the gospel to the world (vs. 8). The angels' promise right after the ascension, assuring the disciples of Jesus' visible return (vs. 11), could also be easily taken as an implicit support of the idea that the time would indeed be rather short. This would be in agreement with previous statements of Jesus that the eschatological consummation was close at hand, which to some extent goes against the interests of the delay hypothesis.

There is no question, though, that the mission Jesus left with the disciples would require time, and after two thousand years the church has not yet been able to fully carry it out. This seems to call for a reflection on both how we define the mission of the church and what it means to finish it. The point, however, is that, from the disciples' standpoint, their mission would look a bit different, and it is here that the book of Acts, or the first developments of the early church, becomes significant. Acquainted as they were with the main evangelistic pattern found in the OT, according to which the nations would flock to Jerusalem to hear the word of God, it is not difficult to conclude that, for the disciples, the conditions of Acts 1:8 had already been met at Pentecost, no matter how narrow such understanding was. On a single day, they received the Spirit and shared the gospel with the whole world, that is, with "Jews from every nation under heaven" who were then "dwelling in Jerusalem" (Acts 2:5). They had not left Jerusalem, but in a sense the world had come to them, as further demonstrated by the appended list of nationalities (vss. 9-11). That those who were baptized were all Jews and proselytes (cf. Acts 6:5) was not a problem either, as according to contemporary Jewish theology salvation could only take place within the limits of the Abrahamic covenant, in which circumcision and adherence to the law played a central role (cf. Acts 11:3; 15:1, 5; Gal 2:11-14).²¹ The disciples would hardly have conceived their worldwide mission as something that went beyond Diaspora Jews, as further episodes in Acts

²¹ Jewish views on the Gentiles varied significantly from more positive Diaspora perspectives (cf. *Let. Aris.*) to more radical Palestinian ones, according to which no Gentile could be saved unless they joined Judaism through circumcision (cf. *Jub.* 15:26, 34; *T. Levi* 6:3; 1QS 5:5; 1QH^a 18:20). See Paroschi, 70-73; Terence L. Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle's Convictional World* (Augsburg: Fortress, 1997), 52-60.

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clearly demonstrate.²² So, with Pentecost the only thing still lacking was Jesus' return.

There are at least four evidences that the post-Pentecost church lived on a daily expectation of the Parousia. The first is the very sermon Peter preached at Pentecost. The OT speaks of the Spirit as the end-time gift (Isa 32:15; 34:16; 44:3-4; 61:1; Ezek 11:19; 36:25-27; 37:1-14; 39:29; Joel 2:28-29; Zech 12:10).²³ In his sermon, Peter resorted to Joel's prophecy to explain the outpouring of the Spirit, and in so doing he introduced a significant twist: instead of Joel's introductory "afterward" (Joel 2:28), a common prophetic formula that points quite generally to the future (e.g., Jer 3:18; 5:18; 31:29; Joel 3:1; 4:1; Zech 8:6, 23; 12:3), he said, "In the last days" (Acts 2:17), probably under the influence of Isa 2:2,²⁴ thus indicating that the final act in the great drama of salvation had just begun (cf. 2 Cor 6:2). What would come next was "the great and glorious day of the Lord" (Acts 2:20, *NIV*). Such was the expectation that characterized the early church (cf. Acts 3:19-21; 1 Cor 10:11; 2 Tim 3:1; Heb 1:2), which could also have a sociological component. As the relations between Jews and Romans deteriorated, Jewish nationalism and consequently their apocalyptic fervor increased significantly,²⁵ and it

²² It is interesting to note how much post-Millerite Sabbatarian Adventists had in common with the early church concerning their missionary perspective. During the first years (1844-1850), under the assumption that the door of grace had been shut to the world, they thought they should preach only to former Millerites. From 1850 to 1874, in an attitude that closely resembles that of the apostolic church, they believed that by preaching the third angel's message in the United States they were preaching to the entire world. And they were ready to justify this view by arguing that the country was comprised of people from nearly every nation on earth. In the course of the next fifteen years (1874-1889), they would send missionaries abroad, but initially only to Christian nations with a strong Protestant influence. It was only after 1890 that the SDA Church made significant efforts to reach all nations and all peoples, irrespective of their religious background. See George R. Knight, *Organizing for Mission and Growth: The Development of Adventist Church Structure* (Hagerstown, MD: R&H, 2006).

²³ So also Second Temple Jewish literature: 1QS 4:21-22; *Jub.* 1:23-25; *1 En.* 49:3; 62:2; *Pss. Sol.* 17:37; *T. Jud.* 24:3; *T. Levi* 18:11; *Tg. Isa.* 42:1-4; *t. Soṭah* 13:2.

²⁴ The prophecy of Isa 2:1-5 is also eschatological, and vs. 2 is the only place in the LXX where Peter's exact phrase in Acts 2:17 (*en tais eschatais hēmerais*) occurs. Since at Pentecost the nations came to Jerusalem, it would have been just natural for Peter to relate what happened that day to Isaiah's as much as to Joel's prophecy. See G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 136-137.

²⁵ Several ancient sources associate the war that culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 with Jewish messianic prophecies. Josephus reports on the impact of a biblical oracle, possibly Num 24:17, according to which "one from their country would

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would have been difficult for the church to remain immune to it, especially on account of the recent events of Jesus' resurrection and the coming of the Spirit.

Second, there was a complete detachment from material goods and a readiness to share belongings with one another (Acts 2:45; 4:34-37). Sensing that time was short, an immediate pooling of resources seemed adequate, all the more so in light of Jesus' teaching on human avarice (Matt 6:19-21; 19:16-30; Luke 12:13-21; cf. 3:10-14) and divine providence (Matt 6:25-34), so they began to sell their properties and live from a common purse according to their individual needs. "There was no need to take thought for the morrow since there would not be one."²⁶ The third evidence is the fact that, though most of the disciples were Galileans (cf. Mark 1:16-20; 14:70; John 1:43; Acts 1:11; 2:7), they established themselves in Jerusalem soon after the ascension of Jesus (cf. Gal 2:17-19)²⁷ and remained centered on the temple (2:46; 3:1; 5:12, 20-21, 25, 42; 21:17-24), which, according to the prophet Malachi, would be the focal point of the imminent consummation (Mal 3:1; cf. Isa 60:1-60:12; Jer 17:25; Zech 8:7-8; Bar 5:5; *Pss. Sol.* 11:1-9; 'Abot R. Nat. 35). To some extent, Jesus' enigmatic statement about destroying and rebuilding the temple (Mark 14:58; 15:29; John 2:19), which evokes the new temple of Ezekiel's vision (Ezek 40:1-43:5), could somehow have fueled hope of a new religious order to be installed by the Messiah (cf. *Jub.* 1:27; Tob 14:5).²⁸ It was only some years later that the apostles understood that Jesus was referring to His resurrection (John 2:22). The final evidence of their belief in the imminence of Jesus' return was the daily celebration of the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:46; 5:42). As the antitype

become ruler of the world" (*J.W.* 6.312-313). Tacitus remarks that most Jews believed that "the ancient scriptures of the priests alluded to the present as the very time when the Orient would triumph and from Judea would go forth men destined to rule the world" (*Hist.* 5.13). Suetonius tells the same story (*Vesp.* 4.5). For further information, see Lester L. Grabbe, *An Introduction to Second Temple Judaism: History and Religion of the Jews in the Time of Nehemiah, the Maccabees, Hillel, and Jesus* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2010), 66-78.

²⁶ C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994-1998), 1:168.

²⁷ Allison, 50 n. 85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 51. See also James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 2^d ed. (London: SCM, 1990), 238-239. For some interesting points of contact between John 2:19 and Ezek 40:1-43:5, see Brian N. Peterson, *John's Use of Ezekiel: Understanding the Unique Perspective of the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), 187-200.

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of the Passover, the most important annual feast of the Jewish calendar, the Lord's Supper points back to the cross, where Jesus as our Passover Lamb was crucified (1 Cor 5:7; cf. Matt 26:26-28; 1 Cor 11:23-26). But, a statement from Jesus also connected it to the future, to the messianic banquet to take place at His return (Matt 26:29; 1 Cor 11:26; cf. Ps 23:5; Isa 25:6; Joel 2:24-26; Matt 8:11-12; 25:1-10; Luke 14:15-24; Rev 19:7-9). In observing this service together on a daily basis, the early believers found a meaningful way to express their faith that Jesus would come back soon.²⁹

Not all of this, however, proved to be a blessing to the church. The pooling of goods, though an expression of genuine piety and effective in helping the poor (Acts 2:42-45; 4:32-35), soon became a problem, as the episode of Ananias and Sapphira shows (Acts 5:1-11). It also contributed to reduce the financial resources of the Judean church (cf. Rom 15:26; Gal 2:10), a situation that worsened under the severe famine that affected the region between AD 46-49 (Acts 11:27-30; Gal 2:10; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.51).³⁰ This made them dependent on the generosity of Gentile believers (cf. Acts 11:29-30; Rom 15:25-27; 1 Cor 16:1-3; 2 Cor 9:1-2, 12-14) and virtually unable to sponsor world evangelism, thus shifting an undue burden to the Gentile churches (cf. Acts 13:1-3; 15:35-36; 2 Cor 11:8-9; Phil 4:15-18).³¹ Such communal life also does not seem to have lasted long and, except for Christian benevolence (e.g., Rom 12:13; Gal 6:10; Eph 4:28; Jas 1:27; 2:2-4, 15-17), is not supported by any of the NT letters. On the contrary, when faced with a slight movement in that direction in one of his churches, Paul's reaction against it was rather strong (cf. 1 Thess 4:11-12; 5:14; 2 Thess 3:6-12).³² Though the

²⁹ See Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 233-236.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 233. On the famine, see Rainer Riesner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology*, trad. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 127-132.

³¹ There is evidence that the church in Jerusalem was comprised of members of all social classes, including the higher ones. See David A. Fiensy, "The Composition of the Jerusalem Church," in *Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham, vol. 4 of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, 5 vols., ed. Bruce W. Winter (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993-1996), 226-230. Yet, irrespective the possibility that some were able to keep their status even after the experience of Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32-35, this seems to have not been enough to change the general situation of the Judean church, as indicated by texts such as Acts 11:28, Rom 15:26, and Gal 2:10.

³² The problem in Thessalonica, however, was not simply that a heightened eschatological enthusiasm had caused some believers to lose interest in workaday affairs,

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underlying premise of having everything in common was laudable, it was untimely and short lived. Detachment from material things will arguably be inevitable at the time of the Second Coming (Matt 24:15-22), but for the early church with a mission to fulfil it represented a step backward.³³ While waiting for Jesus' return, we are not to give away our possessions, but to employ them wisely and unselfishly for the advancement of God's kingdom (Matt 24:45-51; 25:14-30).

But, there was also another problem. Persuaded that their mission had been accomplished at Pentecost, the apostles settled down in Jerusalem and stayed there. They continued to bear witness to Jesus (Acts 2:47; 3:11-26; 4:4, 8-21, 24-31; 5:12-16), but none of them moved more than a few dozen miles away. And, when they did, it was not to lay the grounds for new evangelistic work, but to check on what others were doing (Acts 8:14-25) or to shepherd those who had already been reached (Acts 9:32-43). Even the episode of Cornelius was initiated by God, not by Peter (Acts 10:3-16), highlighting the limited evangelistic vision of the infant church (cf. Acts 11:3). Here, despite not telling the whole story, Luke's account should take precedence over extra-biblical traditions on the apostles' (Peter, in particular) alleged missionary endeavors in the early days of the church.³⁴ It was only in the context of

but that some had left their jobs to engage in a public proclamation of the apocalyptic doom, while expecting to live on the charity of others. See John M. G. Barclay, "Conflict in Thessalonica," *CBQ* 55 (1993): 512-530.

³³ The situation was somewhat analogous to the Great Disappointment of 1844. In *The Great Controversy*, Ellen G. White says that William Miller was God's chosen instrument "to lead out in the proclamation of Christ's second coming." "His labors were blessed in a remarkable manner," and "the Spirit of God rested upon" those who accepted his message ([Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1911], 317, 331, 340). Then, she spends a whole chapter (chap. 19) trying to explain how, in spite of that, the Millerites could have been wrong concerning the event that closes the prophetic period. She argues that no human person, "however honored of heaven, has ever attained to a full understanding" of God's purposes (343). "Even the prophets who were favored with the special illumination of the Spirit did not fully comprehend the import of the revelations committed to them" (344). "Not infrequently"—she continues—"the minds of the people, and even of God's servants, are so blinded by human opinions, the traditions and false teachings of men, that they are able only partially to grasp the things which He has revealed in His word" (ibid.). And so the Millerites "were mistaken in regard to the event to take place at the expiration of the 2300 days" (353). In other words, being filled with the Spirit does not guarantee that mistakes and misinterpretations will not occur.

³⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea tells of Peter arriving in Rome to overthrow the work of Simon Magus (cf. Acts 8:9-24) in the second year of Claudius, around AD 42 (*Hist. eccl.* 2.14.1-6; *Chron.*). The *Catalogus Liberianus*, a compilation of early church history dating from AD 354, also speaks of Peter as the founder of the church in Rome, having

the persecution led by unconverted Paul that some believers—all Hellenistic Jews—crossed the Jewish borders and embraced world mission (8:4-8, 26-35; 11:19-21).³⁵ In Acts, all Gentile-oriented missionary efforts that are intentional and carefully planned are associated with Syrian Antioch, not with Jerusalem, and with Paul, not with any of the Twelve (Acts 13:1-3; 15:36, 40; 18:22-23).³⁶ It was mostly because of Paul, himself a Hellenistic Jew (Acts 21:39; 22:3) and,

exercised there an episcopate of twenty-five years, until his death under Nero (AD 67). Yet, this is nothing more than a later legendary tradition built on the assumption that, after his miraculous release from prison (Acts 12:6-11), the apostle left Jerusalem “and went to another place” (vs. 17). As for Eusebius’ note, it is virtually impossible to reconcile it with Acts 15:7-11 and Gal 2:7-9, according to which Peter had apparently not yet gone away from the city at the time of the council, in AD 49. In the episode of Gal 2:11-14, which could hardly have taken place before the end of Paul’s second journey (AD 49-52), Peter pays a visit to Syrian Antioch, some 300 miles northeast of Jerusalem, but he still seems to be based in Jerusalem. As for 1 Cor 1:10-17, this passage does not necessarily require that close to AD 55, when this letter was likely written, Peter had been in Corinth; Christ certainly had not. Those who said “I am of Cephas” could well have been acquainted with him from previous encounters in Judea (cf. Acts 18:1-18, 24-28; 19:1). On the basis of 1 Pet 1:1-2, it may be argued that the apostle had ministered in Asia Minor when he wrote the letter, which he seems to have done from Rome (cf. 1 Pet 5:13), ca. AD 63. That Peter (and Paul) eventually died in Rome during the Neronian persecution is generally recognized as an established fact (1 Clem. 5:3-7; cf. Ign. *Rom.* 4:3; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.1.1; 3.3.2). Concerning the other apostles prior to AD 62, the most probable date for the composition of Acts, the information is practically nonexistent. Later in the first century we read of John being exiled to Patmos (Rev 1:9), supposedly under Domitian (Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 5.30.3). According to Tertullian, before that, John was taken to Rome—the apocryphal *Acts of John*, which was known to Tertullian, says it was from Ephesus—where he was thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil (*Praescr.* 36). No reliable information exists as to when, if at all, John would have moved from Jerusalem to Ephesus. In any case, this could well have occurred after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. After being freed from Patmos, John is said to have returned to Ephesus (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.20.10) where he died in the times of Trajan (AD 98-117). It was during this time that he would have published his gospel (Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 3.1.1; 3.3.4). On the alleged missionary activities of the remaining apostles, see W. Brian Shelton, *The Quest for the Historical Apostles: Tracing Their Lives and Legacies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018).

³⁵ Those Hellenistic Jewish believers who were expelled from Jerusalem “became the real founders of the mission to the Gentiles, in which circumcision and observation of the ritual law were no longer required” (Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity*, trans. John Bowden [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1983], 13).

³⁶ Richard Bauckham’s claim that Acts 1:8 does not require that the apostles should leave Jerusalem, but only their witness, is largely unconvincing (“The Delay of the Parousia,” *TynBul* 31 [1980]: 25-26; reprint, Richard Bauckham, *The Jewish World around the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008], 65-88).

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in his own words, an “untimely born” apostle (1 Cor 15:8), that Christianity truly became a world religion (Acts 19:10, 26; Rom 15:19-20, 23-24; Col 1:6; cf. 1 Cor 15:10).

The Nearness and the Mission

The post-resurrected Jesus left the disciples two eschatological legacies that are equally important: the expectation of His soon return and a worldwide mission. Expectation conveys sense of urgency. Mission presupposes time. Without the former, there would be no preparation for the Second Coming or motivation for mission. Without the latter, there would be fanaticism and idle contemplation. This explains, at least in part, what happened to the early church. Though they did not indulge in idleness, leaving all their social and religious responsibilities aside (Acts 2:42-43, 46-47; 4:32-33), to some degree they lost their initial missionary impetus³⁷ and consequently the sense of time when they established a pooling and common charitable use of all resources while waiting for Jesus to come. The morrow vanished from their sight, and this was not without serious consequences.

At this point, the elapsed time since the ascension of Jesus makes it relevant, if not necessary, to address both the issue of nearness and the concept of mission. As already mentioned, Jesus said He would come back soon, and the NT writers never grew tired of repeating this promise,³⁸ even when the first generation of believers had already mostly passed away (Rev 1:3; 22:20). Since two thousand years have elapsed and Jesus has not yet come, how to explain this emphasis? There are at least three factors to be taken into account. The first is that the new age of salvation inaugurated by Jesus' death (and resurrection) is indeed an eschatological time—“the last days,” as Peter said at Pentecost (Acts 2:17; cf. 1 Cor 10:11; Heb 9:26; 1 Pet 1:20). The cross represented the most crucial event in redemptive history, the one that guaranteed God eternal victory in the cosmic conflict against evil. It was “the turning point of the ages,” as G. K. Beale says.³⁹ If Jesus' earthly ministry provided a *revelation* of God's kingdom (Luke 4:18-21; 7:18-23; 10:17-24) and the Parousia will feature the definitive *restoration* of God's

³⁷ Ellen G. White addresses this issue in *Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 105.

³⁸ Henry C. Thiessen claims that there are over 300 references to the Second Coming in the NT (*Lectures in Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949], 442).

³⁹ Beale, 141.

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kingdom (Matt 16:28; Luke 21:31; 1 Cor 15:24-25; cf. Dan 7:13-14),⁴⁰ Jesus' death signified the ultimate *vindication* of God's kingdom (John 12:31; 16:11; Heb 2:14; 1 Pet 3:18-22; Rev 12:7-12; cf. Luke 24:26), the moment when the ruler of this world was cast out and the kingdom was reconquered,⁴¹ so Jesus could say after His resurrection: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt 28:18; cf. Luke 22:69; John 17:1, 4-5; Rev 5:1-14).

The second factor concerning the nearness concept is the transience and uncertainty of life. No one really knows how long he or she will live, and eighty or even ninety years do not seem long enough, especially in view of eternity. As Moses said, "The years of our life ... are soon gone, and we fly away" (Ps 90:10; cf. Jas 4:14; 1 Pet 1:24). This is why, when it comes to salvation, the only time we can really count on is the present (cf. Acts 22:16; Heb. 3:7-8, 13, 15; 4:6-7). The past is gone and the future may never come (cf. Prov 27:1). Procrastination may be a tragic mistake of eternal proportions, hence the importance assigned by Jesus to readiness and vigilance in relation to His return (Matt 24:38-44; 25:1-13; Luke 12:35-40, 41-48; 21:36). This brings us to the concept of individual eschatology, in which the time of the eschaton merges with one's own life experience, instead of being solely conditioned to a historical succession of events. According to this concept, which is part of John's realized eschatology, the final judgment takes place at the moment of one's response to Jesus' radical call to belief (John 3:18-19; 5:22, 24). The future eschatological judgment remains (John 12:48), but essential to the gospel message is the fact that the sentence on that judgment will depend entirely on our decision about Jesus here and now.⁴² This also means that, since there is no further opportunity for repentance (cf. Luke

⁴⁰ Not counting the thousand years (cf. Rev 20:1-21:4), as Peter does in 2 Pet 3:9-13.

⁴¹ In fact, God's kingdom throughout Jesus' ministry and its final *vindication* on the cross can be separated only for didactic purposes, as they represent two acts of the same drama. As Beale correctly remarks, Jesus' endurance of the temptation in the wilderness was the beginning of Satan's defeat, and whenever He cast out demons He was accomplishing His holy warfare against evil (Beale, 419-421). The cross was the climactic event of that warfare. "It is the entire mission of Jesus," Ladd concurs, "which brings about Satan's defeat" (*The Presence of the Future*, 157). See also Gregory A. Boyd, "Christus Victor View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 23-49.

⁴² See C. F. D. Moule, "The Individualism of the Fourth Gospel," *NovT* 5 (1962): 174; Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 343-344; I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 517-518.

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12:20; 16:25), death precipitates the end on a personal level. When one dies, the next thing will be the second coming of Jesus (cf. 2 Cor 5:6-8; Phil 1:21-23).⁴³ That is, for every person Christ's return is as imminent as his or her death, which may come at any time.⁴⁴

And the third factor is that, with God, "one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet 3:8). This is not a philosophical speculation about the being of God, as if His perception of time is so utterly different from ours that the very notion of delay becomes meaningless. It is rather an affirmation of the contrast that exists between human transience and divine everlastingness. Because of our limited perspective, we tend to tie our expectations to our own brief lifetime, instead of seeing them from the standpoint of the eternal God, who surveys the whole history. God is free from such impatience. The hope of an imminent end, therefore, is not to be abandoned, but to be set against the consideration that the delay, however lengthy to us, may not be so significant within the entire scope of God's actions in history.⁴⁵ In addition, as the following verse indicates (vs. 9), the delay does have some positive aspects. On one hand, since God "is *not slow* about His promise," the delay underscores His sovereignty in the sense that He is in full control of the course of history. On the other, it is an expression of God's saving purposes, because in His divine forbearance God may hold back His interventions in history in order to give sinners further opportunity to repent (cf. Hab 2:3).⁴⁶ Thus, while still longing for Jesus' soon return, we must trust God's decisions, and let Him execute His plans according to His sovereign and gracious will.

Concerning the mission of the church and its implications for the Second Coming, some considerations are also in order. First, the call to

⁴³ As G. B. Caird points out, at death time is suspended, and so the next thing one is aware of is resurrecting at the second coming of Jesus. That is, "one enters the presence of Christ at the moment of death and ... this is experienced by everyone simultaneously" (*New Testament Theology*, compl. and ed. L. D. Hurst [Oxford: Clarendon, 1994], 272). The notion of simultaneity is taken from 2 Ezra 5:41-42: "I said, 'But surely, Lord, your promise is to those who are alive at the end. What is to be the fate of those who lived before us, or of ourselves, or of those who come after us?' He said to me, 'I will compare the judgment to a circle: the latest will not be too late, nor the earliest too early.'" Caird explains: as "in a circle all points on the circumference are equidistant from the center ... every person's death is equidistant from the Day of the Lord" (273).

⁴⁴ See Edwin Reynolds, "Now Is the Time: The Eschatology of the New Testament," *AASS* (1999): 87-89.

⁴⁵ Bauckham, "The Delay of the Parousia," 25-26.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

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witness to the entire world is an essential part of God's redemptive plan. On one hand, the new era of salvation introduced by Jesus does allow God to reclaim humanity for Himself (Matt 28:18-20; Luke 24:46-48; Acts 1:8; 26:18; Col 1:13; cf. Luke 14:15-24);⁴⁷ on the other, such reclamation is important to consolidate Satan's defeat (Luke 10:17-18; 11:14-23). "Every ... conversion involves a power encounter in which the devil is obliged to relax his hold on somebody's life and the superior power of Christ is demonstrated."⁴⁸ Hence, the more converts, the more comprehensive God's victory over the forces of evil (Rev 7:9-12; 19:1). This is why the good news of the kingdom has to be proclaimed to the world (Matt 24:14; Rev 14:6). To be active in the mission, therefore, is to be God's instruments to populate His kingdom and so to minimize Satan's destructive work. Second, the final consummation is not necessarily contingent upon the success of the mission. This appears to contradict the previous point, but the issue is that the restoration of God's kingdom depends entirely on the accomplishments of Jesus, not on what we can do individually or as a church. In fact, it would be presumptuous to say that God needs us. He does not (cf. Job 22:2-4; Acts 17:25). He has unlimited resources to carry out His purposes and to advance His kingdom on earth (cf. Luke 19:39-40). Nevertheless, He was pleased to include us in His plans. And beyond the fact that He made this our duty (Matt 28:18), witnessing to Jesus is such a high privilege that when properly understood will not produce but a deep commitment and passion for it (Acts 4:19-20, 29-31; Rom 1:14-15; 1 Cor 9:16-23).

Third, the success of the mission should not be measured according to secular criteria of efficiency and productivity. Though there is nothing wrong with quantifying church growth (Acts 1:15; 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7), God seems to reckon the spread of the gospel on a different basis. After two years of Paul's ministry in Ephesus, Luke says that "all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, [had] heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10, *NRSV*), and Paul himself could tell the Romans that "from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum" he had already preached the gospel (Rom 15:19), or the Colossians that the gospel message was "bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world" (Col 1:6). None such statements can really be taken in absolute terms, which should remind us that God's notion of success might be different

⁴⁷ See Paroschi, 20-21.

⁴⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 236.

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from ours.

In short, neither the time of the Second Coming nor the completion of the mission is to be assessed by human standards. In final analysis, none of them depends on us, which means we should not try to find out who is responsible for the delay, neither use guilt as a mechanism of evangelistic engagement, as if Jesus would not come again until the last person on earth is reached by the gospel message. Things are not that simple. It is important to remember that, by saying that no one knows the day or the hour of His return (Mark 13:32), Jesus is implicitly affirming that, in His divine sovereignty, God does have a set time for Jesus to come and to bring the present era to an end⁴⁹ (cf. Acts 1:6-7; 3:19-21; 17:30-31), and some time prophecies found in the Bible are an eloquent reminder that God's plan will not fail. So, the idea that we can hasten or delay the Second Coming seems to overstress human protagonism in redemptive history. Though in many ways there is a synergy between human and divine activities, much caution is needed not to lessen the significance of Jesus' accomplishments on the cross, the scope of divine sovereignty, and the value of apocalyptic prophecy, particularly those associated with time.

Conclusion

The early church was born as an eschatological community with a high sense of urgency. It was also established as a missionary movement with the responsibility to take the gospel to the entire world. Both concepts go back to Jesus Himself and are integral to God's redemptive plan. There seems to be a tension between them, but it is exactly when this tension is kept in proper balance that the church finds itself the way God wants it to be. These two eschatological legacies are intended to maintain the church stable and operational. If the nearness is emphasized over the mission, there will be radicalism and idleness. We do not know the precise date of Jesus' return, and it is not yet time to withdraw from the world and wait for the end in some remote place. Jesus' intercessory prayer for the disciples is as valid today as it was in the first century (John 17:15-18). We are in the world with a purpose: to "proclaim the

⁴⁹ "The Parousia and the judgment it will inaugurate are matters irrevocably decided. From this perspective the Parousia is not conditioned by any other consideration than the sovereign decision of the Father, which remains enveloped with impenetrable mystery" (William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, NICNT [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974], 482).

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excellencies of Him who called” us “out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9). God’s kingdom has already been vindicated, but the revelation of its power, the riches of Christ, and the manifold wisdom of God (Eph 3:8, 10) must continue until its final restoration. In essence, the role of the church is not different from that of ancient Israel. At the same time, without a real sense of Jesus’ soon return, the only true motivation for mission disappears and the missionary focus is lost, causing the church to become nothing more than a social guild with religious overtones. An enduring commitment to these sacred legacies is vital to the church as it heads towards the end of its history on earth,⁵⁰ an end that will actually signal a new beginning, when God’s kingdom in the universe will be fully and definitively restored: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever (Rev 11:15).

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⁵⁰ “The whole interim period between Pentecost and the Parousia (however short or long) is to be filled with the world-wide mission of the church in the power of the Spirit. Christ’s followers were both to announce what He had achieved at His first coming and to summon people to repent and believe in preparation for His second coming. They were to be His witnesses ‘to the ends of the earth’ ... and ‘to the very end of the age.’ ... We have no liberty to stop until both ends have been reached” (John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990], 44).