The Time is Near! Or, Is It?
Dare We Abandon Our Eschatological Expectation?

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Paul said to the Romans that the time of salvation is at the door “nearer now than when we first believed.” Indeed, “the night is nearly over, the day is almost here” (13:11-12). Nearly two thousand years have passed since the apostle instructed Tertius to write those words. By what stretch of the imagination was the end “almost” present at the time of Paul? Was the apostle mistaken?

Were the Pentecostals mistaken at the turn of the century when they shared the apostle’s conviction in their time as well? In the words of Grant Wacker, they were convinced that they were riding the crest of the wave of history. This wave was to involve them in a final end-time drama characterized by an intense sense of the divine presence and an experience of the powers of the Spirit for healing, global evangelism, and generally conquering the forces of darkness. The same Christ that was raised from the dead by the power of the Spirit and who poured out the Spirit upon the disciples would return soon to raise the dead and to set in motion those events that would lead to the new heavens and new earth. But now, about a century has passed since the Pentecostals participated with other groups in reviving Paul’s intense eschatological expectation for a near climax to the redemptive work of God in the world. They were obviously “mistaken,” too.

Really? Let’s explore this matter further. What lay behind Paul’s conviction that the fulfillment of the Kingdom was near? What suggests itself immediately is the fact that John the Baptist’s and Jesus’ preaching was of the nearness of the Kingdom (Matt. 3:1; 4:17). Though the Kingdom was yet to come (Matt. 6:10), the nearness of the Kingdom caused its powers to be felt among or, better, to break in upon communities of people in acts of deliverance and healing (Matt. 12:28). The message of that Kingdom and the effects of its nearness on those in need of deliverance were not made irrelevant by the eschatological events of Jesus’ resurrection and the
outpouring of the Spirit. To the contrary, these events only made Jesus’ message of the coming Kingdom all the more urgent, due to the fact that they set in motion the final end without having lifted the burden of sin and death entirely from the creation. The apocalyptic vision of a cosmic new creation was “almost” but still not entirely fulfilled. This “not-yet” aspect of cosmic redemption would not allow the disciples to harbor the illusion that the Kingdom had already been fulfilled without qualification in the inner recesses of gnostic enlightenment. Even with the first-fruit of the Holy Spirit present in the world, sin and death still had a grip on creation. The full effects of Jesus’ resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit were still on the horizon. Believers felt it, lived from it, and saw it coming ever closer. The final resurrection or transformation of the children of God at Christ’s return would soon lead to the liberation of the entire creation from the bondage of decay and death (8:21). This was the world of the text that Paul shared with us. This is the world that draws readers in to comfort the suffering and to unsettle the comfortable. Whether we like it or not, an essential part of that world was Paul’s conviction that the time of fulfillment was at the door, or “almost here.” And any effort simply to abandon this part of our Pentecostal heritage distances us from something vital to the biblical witness within which the Pentecostals and others have sought to live.

But let us back up a moment. Should we not distance ourselves from this conviction that Christ and the final new creation are at the door? Should we not conclude that such things are holdovers from an outdated and irrelevant apocalyptic worldview that we can no longer accept? Can we shed this aspect of the text like a set of old clothes? In fact, haven’t we done so already? And what have we replaced them with?

These are difficult questions, since the hermeneutical issue of stepping into the world of an ancient text from a significantly different contemporary context is complex. As we do so we will be attentive to other voices in the canon, such as the biblical insight into the patience of God in history that qualifies the biblical intensity of eschatological expectation (2 Peter 3:8-9) or the Bible’s encouragement for us to be both world affirming and denying (cf. Phil. 1:21-24). Such wisdom will help us to be wary of those who seek to use the fervent eschatological expectation of the biblical text to terrify or manipulate toward extreme and destructive ends.

As we discuss the hermeneutical issues, we should not be surprised if the intense eschatological expectation of Romans 13:8 does not reach out and draw us in (we can always finish discussing the hermeneutical impli-