

THE GREAT COMMISSION & THE FUTURE

Perhaps the Church is over compensating for what may have been an overzealousness and imbalance in 20th century prophetic Bible teaching and more specifically, during the last half of the 20th century, with the formation of the modern state of Israel. *Yet, we should not throw out the baby with the over sensationalized prophetic bath water!* It is time to recalibrate our reading of Scripture and return to a deep concern leading to a more sincere study of the events surrounding the second coming of Christ.

If we do not have the end in mind then we will not do the work He has called us to do with dispatch or enthusiasm. Human need can only motivate global evangelism to a certain extent as there are billions needing Jesus who will never hear because their material needs are not apparent. We have become more concerned with the present than the future. We feed the body and attempt to free captives from various forms of social slavery, but these expressions of love and grace alone will not save a person. It is the burning hope of heaven and fear of hell rooted in the soul of the disciple and part of Jesus' teaching about the "consummation" and the end of the age that moves the Church to complete her task.

The following is a representative summary of the events. I divided the list between those events that are commonly agreed-upon by Christians and others which are debated.

I. Matters Commonly Agreed Upon

- A. A growing tribulation and hardship on earth (1 Thess 5:2-9; Rev 3:10; 11:18)
- B. The reign of the Anti-Christ (2 Thess 2:8ff; Rev 13:11-15)
- C. The physical return of Jesus (Matt 19:28; 24:30-31; Luke 12:40)
- D. The lifting of the curse upon earth (Isa 65:17-25; Matt 19:28; Rev 21:1ff)
- E. The establishment of the Kingdom (Dan 2:34-35; 44; Isa 9:6-7)
- F. The Resurrection of the dead (John 5:28-29; 1 Cor 15:52)
- G. The national repentance of the remnant of Israel (Rom 11:26; Zech 12:10 -13:1)
- H. The Great White Throne Judgment (John 5:22; 2 Cor 5:10)
- I. The Binding of Satan (Rev 19:20; 20:1-3)
- J. The arrival of the Saints from Heaven with Jesus (Matt 24:31; 1 Thess 4:16)

II. Debated Matters

- A. The rapture of the church (John 14:1-3; 1 Thess 4:13-18)
- B. The rebuilding of the Temple (evidence for Temple: Matt 24:15; Rev 11:1-12)
- C. The *Millennial* Temple (Zech 6:12,13; Is 6:1-5; Ezek 43:1-5)
- D. The attack by the nations against Israel (Zech 12:1-9; 14:3; Ezek 38 – 39)

- E. The return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel (Ezek 34:11-13; 37:1-14; *Isa 11:11-12*)
- F. The re-establishment of the literal Davidic throne in Jerusalem (Jer 23:4-6; Isa 11:1-5)
- G. The Gentiles coming to Jerusalem to worship the Messiah and participate in the events of the Jewish calendar (Zech 14:12-20; Mic 4:1-4)

When we lose a future oriented perspective and neglect to study eschatology with an eye for the details of the second coming, we miss the urgency attached by Jesus to the Great Commission.

The Great Commission and God’s Covenants with the Jewish People

Ignoring the future Jesus envisions for Israel and the nations, which includes a more literal establishment of the Davidic Kingdom, promised in 2 Samuel 7:14ff and 1 Chronicles 17:10-15, Psalm 89 etc., and even further developed in the writings of the prophets (Isaiah 42, 44, 49, 60-65, Jeremiah 31-35, Ezekiel 36-39 etc.), short circuits our understanding of the future God has promised to His people. If you minimize the teaching of the Old Testament by spiritualizing the coming kingdom, de-literalizing the Abrahamic and Davidic promises of God to Israel, then the consummation of the ages will be unclear and less relevant.

By understanding more of the details included in the consummation as Jesus explained thoroughly to His disciples in Matthew 24, you will develop a greater sense of urgency for the Gospel.

The Abrahamic Covenant

In many ways the Great Commission is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. In this foundational passage God outlined His plan for His chosen people and marked four major legs upon which the promise stands. By calling Abram to be His “Semite” (see Genesis 9:26, 11:10-32, 12:1-3) and vehicle of promise for a fallen world; God promised the Patriarch that he would be given a people, a land, a relationship with the Creator and a mission – to bless the world. There would be consequences for those nations that did not “bend the knee”(from בָּרַךְ, usually translated, to bless) to the descendants of Abraham and bless them (Genesis 12:3)¹

and God chose the Abrahamic family to be His conduit of blessings. The Lord always had the nations in mind even when He selected Abram and narrowed His choice of nations called for His holy purposes. This role for Israel among the nations was reiterated through the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah 41:8-9, 43:10, 44:8). Israel’s purpose was to

¹ Moses uses two Hebrew words for curse. The first, from קָלַל, referring to making light of the role the Jewish people would play in God’s plan and the second, from אָרַר, used throughout Dt. 28 and Lev. 26, refers to the temporal curses that would be meted out upon Israel for disobedience. Therefore, if a nation made light of the Jewish people they would receive the curses for disobedience that were promised to fall upon Israel as well.

show the nations the truth of the one true God and ultimately to capture His inerrant words through Moses, the Psalmists, prophets and ultimately the writers of the New Testament (who were primarily Jewish). Israel failed in her efforts to bring the light to the nations, but God raised up His own Son to complete the task and His Son called disciples from among the remnant of Israel and the Gentiles to continue this task. A task that would be completed by the time Jesus returns and as Luke records in his presentation of the Olivet Discourse,

and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. (Luke 21:24)

With the background of the Abrahamic Covenant the Great Commission makes perfect sense as being an eschatological commission, a mission with the future in mind, and a sign of soon coming συντελείας. The inclusion of the Gentiles was part of God's plan for all eternity and His means of inclusion through the Messiah would still be come the Jewish people, in this instance the Jewish Messiah and the Jewish disciples. The task, unfinished by the early Messianic disciples would be given to those Gentiles as well that were grafted into the rich root of the olive tree and now share in this Abrahamic heritage. These new disciples form among the "other sheep" (John 10:16) who do not replace the Jewish people but rather support and aid the Jewish disciples in the fulfillment of this global evangelistic mission. Is it any wonder the Lord called a learned Jewish disciple to be the father of the Gentile mission? And it is with the completion of this task that Jesus again turns His chosen people to the Lord and returns to reign as King (Romans 11:11-29)!

The Promise of His Coming

and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ' ὑμῶν εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος.)

Our Future Hope and the Great Commission

Jesus is earlier asked the question by His disciples,

As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"(Matthew 24:3)

The word, συντελείας is used in this passage as well. There is no question that this consummation event weighs heavily on the minds of the disciples as well as the Messiah. This flies in the face of our current Evangelical disinterest and disdain for sermons about the future, end time prophecy and the growing focus of our local and global ministries on the pressing needs of humanity.

Yet Jesus and the disciples were concerned about the future. Perhaps this was in part influenced

by first century Jewish Messianic expectation? This is reflected in inter-testamental literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls and early Rabbinic literature as well that reflected the mind set of Second Temple Judaism. The coming Kingdom that Jesus spoke about would inevitably come and both the spiritual and physical aspects of the coming kingdom, especially as predicted by the prophets would undoubtedly come to pass as the *συντελεία* would include both.

The Gentiles would have a major role in the events of the consummation of history as God's vehicle of turning the Jewish people back to Himself through His Son. And this future conversion of the Jewish people would serve as the lynch pin for the second coming and the events of the consummation. The Gentiles therefore had a key role in bringing about the consummation and then would enjoy the Abrahamic blessings of the kingdom along with a redeemed Israel. However, these blessings would not be ethereal or "spiritual". These would include the very physical promises to Israel and the Gentile nations.

Yet Jesus Himself and the disciples following Him did not have a bifurcated view of God's blessings as if the literal and more physical manifestations of the kingdom of God would in some way keep Him from ameliorating the present pain of sinners.

Jesus demonstrated His deep and often pained concern for everyday needs of humanity. He healed, spoke words of comfort, raised individuals from the dead, set demoniacs free and much more fulfilling the prophecy about the Messiah found in Isaiah 35. Matthew records Jesus' answer to the questions of John's disciples in Matthew 11:2-5.

Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them"

Yet Jesus also kept His eye on the future and His disciples asked questions about the consummation and Jesus patiently and at great length answered as this unstoppable cataclysmic consummation of human history described in Matthew 24 and referred to in the Great Commission would as soon come to pass as the Saviors coming death and resurrection.

As Evangelicals we need to embrace the future God has planned for us, and the entirety of humanity. Jesus mentions this future many times in the Gospels. The following helpful summary reminds us of how often the future kingdom is mentioned by Jesus Himself and in the New Testament.

Over sixty times in the New Testament alone. All 9 New Testament authors mention the Second Coming specifically ... most of them numerous times. And Jesus Himself prophesied it several times (as recorded in the 4 gospels).²

² <http://www.answers.com>

In an article in Jesus.org, American popular preacher and pastor, Church Swindoll writes,

- *These facts from biblical prophecy about Christ's return may surprise you:*
- *One out of every 30 verses in the Bible mentions the subject of Christ's return or the end of time.*
- *Of the 216 chapters in the New Testament, there are well over 300 references to the return of Christ.*
- *23 of the 27 New Testament books mention Christ's return.*
- *Christ often spoke specifically about His own return to earth.*
- *Throughout the centuries, Christ's disciples and followers have adamantly believed, written, and taught that Christ would someday return to earth.*
- *The Bible teaches it. The Lord Jesus stood upon its truths. The apostles declared it and wrote about it. The creeds include it and affirm it³.*

Swindoll is correct in his assessment. The future is a major concern and not a minor interest of the authors of Scripture.

In Matthew 24-25, where again Jesus uses the term *συντελείας*, Jesus describes specific events that will be telltale signs of His return. At other times He commands His disciples to be mindful of the signs of the times. Why? The future is important to God and it should be important to us as well. The future should shape our present!

However, the mood in the church has shifted over the last 50 years. Today's disciples are generally uncomfortable with biblical prophecy and have proffered some type of *eschatological agnosticism*. If asked, most believer will tell you they do believe in the physical return of the Lord and the establishment of the kingdom, but if you ask any thing further you might be told that it is enough to know the future is coming but we should not debate the specifics. It seems that any discussion about the literal second coming of Jesus that goes beyond acknowledging the event is skeptically viewed as some type of obsession on unknowable future events. This is inappropriate, many would say, in light of the current suffering of humanity and therefore we should be more concerned about today and the ministries needed than tomorrow – which is unknowable. What the Bible says and more specifically the ways in which many Bible teachers write and speak about the end times is murky, hard to interpret, divisive and fanciful at times.

Perhaps a more balanced approach is needed? We should be concerned about the *συντελείας* and the future as Jesus told His disciples to “*διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν*,” which would include His teachings about His coming and the need to prepare. We ignore the future at our own peril and in disobedience to the words of the Lord in the Great Commission.

Jesus teaches His disciples that the “end of the age”, the *συντελείας* is as certain as His death and resurrection. Should we concern ourselves with the details? Of course! As His disciples we should not trivialize truth that mattered so profoundly to our Savior. If so, we demonstrate that we have not learned, followed and observed what he taught, thereby denying the very

³ <http://www.jesus.org/early-church-history/promise-of-the-second-coming/does-the-bible-teach-that-jesus-will-return.html>

Commission He has called us to pass along.

If we are not telling people about the end of the age then we are not doing what Jesus instructed us to do. Perhaps we do not want to embarrass God or be viewed as fanatics on a soapbox in Hyde Park or as Americans would imagine, standing in the middle of a busy urban center with a cheeseboard sign hanging on our bodies announcing that the end is near?

Perhaps the Church is over compensating for what may have been an overzealousness and imbalance in 20th century prophetic Bible teaching and more specifically, during the last half of the 20th century, with the formation of the modern state of Israel. *Yet, we should not throw out the baby with the over sensationalized prophetic bath water!* It is time to recalibrate our reading of Scripture and return to a deep concern and even a longing for the *συντελείας* mentioned in our text and the events surrounding the second coming of Christ.

If we do not have the end in mind then we will not do the work He has called us to do with dispatch or enthusiasm. Human need can only motivate global evangelism to a certain extent as there are billions needing Jesus who will never hear because their material needs are not apparent. We have become more concerned with the present than the future. We feed the body and attempt to free captives from various forms of social slavery, but these expressions of love and grace alone will not save a person. It is the burning hope of heaven and fear of hell rooted in the soul of the disciple and part of Jesus' teaching about the "consummation" and the end of the age that moves the Church to complete her task.

Yet, my even mentioning this has made some of you wince and you suspiciously wonder if all I have said is simply out of date and out of step with our times? I am out of date. Preaching about the "end" is today viewed as passé and somewhat embarrassing and out of touch with 21st century church. Yet Jesus did not demure from telling His disciples that the time is short and calling upon the world to believe and obey the Gospel is as, if not more important, than all our good efforts to alleviate the temporal pain and suffering of a broken humanity!

It is our understanding of this immanent future that drives us to preach the Gospel.

We are out of balance and our message to a sinful world is lukewarm because we simply do not take the future as seriously as our Savior. We have not *διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν* because we have neglected to warn the world of what is coming!

What are we to do with our time until this *συντελείας* arrives? I could probably provide a list, but aside from behaving like believers, loving people and showing it and being obedient to the moral commands of the Savior (Matthew 5-7, John 13 etc.) we are obligated to fulfill the Great Commission. Jesus has called us persuade a sinful and broken world that they not only need to believe, but to learn, follow and observe (obey) what He said. This was a great responsibility for these early Jewish disciples and for us well who have been grandfathered into the cause!

We should be motivated in our proclamation by our love for God and man, yet we also should have a rightful fear on behalf of those who do not believe as the *συντελείας* brings with it both great blessings to those who believe and judgment to those who do not.

Jewish Evangelism and the Great Commission

What then is the role of the Jewish people today? Has God abandoned His covenant people because of unbelief and covenant disobedience? Or, is there still a particular purpose God has for Jewish people today? Are the Jewish people one *ethne* among many in the fulfillment of the great Commission, or do the Jewish people still have a biblically defined role in the συντελείας.

Paul, a Messianic Jew himself, responds to his own questions in Romans 11:1 by describing the future salvation of the Jewish people and the impact this will have on the rest of the world and argues in Romans chapter 11 more particularly that the salvation of the Jewish people will be the lynchpin in fulfilling God's ultimate purposes for the world.

12 Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! 15 For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

I can only imagine that this is the event Paul had in mind when he penned Romans 1:16. Knowing the future plan of God, the church should somehow prioritize Jewish evangelism, especially as we see the day of His second coming drawing near. Paul

Bringing the Gospel to the Jewish people *first* should not be viewed as a *priority of privilege*, but as a *priority founded on the Lord's strategy to heal a world broken by sin*. God chose the Jewish people for a special role and one day this will become evident as the end time remnant of Jewish people repent and the Lord returns (Zech. 12:10, Isaiah 9:6-7, Acts 3:19 ff.).

This gives us insight into Paul's statement earlier in Romans 11:11.

I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous.

According to Paul's statement in Romans 11:11, the Gentiles are to be called to make the Jewish people jealous of Jesus within them.

The Lord chose the Jewish people to reach the Gentiles, but my people failed and so He sent His Son, the greatest Jewish person who ever lived, to complete the task. And now He calls upon Gentiles who believed the Gospel through a remnant of Jewish people to bring the message back to the original messengers!

So may I ask the question? How will the British church fulfill this mandate to prioritize Jewish evangelism and make Jewish people jealous? This applies to the UK, Israel and to the rest of the world where Christians have so many opportunities to engage Jewish people with the gospel. What practical steps can be taken to give the British church around the world a passion for reaching Jewish people with the message of the Jewish Messiah?