

THE CHURCH'S PROPHETIC DESTINY

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

What is the prophetic future of the church? In order to deal with this matter we must first understand that the church relates in two ways to the program of God. First, the true church is made up of Jews and Gentiles who genuinely know Christ as their Savior and have their sins forgiven. Beginning on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 and continuing till the rapture, all those who trust Christ as their Saviour are part of His Body the Bible calls the church. Believers before the founding of the Church in Acts 2 and those who become believers after the rapture are not part of the Church, the Body of Christ.

Second, there is the realm of the professing church's influence which we will call Christendom. Christendom constitutes any and every thing associated with the visible church, including all of her branches and organizations like Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox, Protestantism, and even the cults. Christendom includes true believers and false professors who have never been truly born again, the wheat and the tares growing up together (Matthew 13:24-30). These two aspects of the church have very different prophetic destinies.

THE RAPTURE

The next event on the prophetic calendar for the true church is the rapture (John 14:1-3, 1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thes, 4:13-18, etc.). This event is described in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 which says it will be a time in which all living and dead believers "shall be caught up . . . in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." This event could happen at any moment, without warning and is described by the motif of Christ as groom and the church as a bride. In the present age the church is betrothed or engaged to Christ—totally committed, having been bought by His blood. The groom has gone away to the Father's house to prepare a place in order to bring His bride back to their special place in His Father's house. While away, which will span the current church age, the bride's faithfulness is tested by the separation and she is to remain faithful while constantly waiting for His sudden and unannounced return. When the Father gives the signal, the shout will go forth and the church age will be brought to an end at the rapture, and thus, shall we always be with the Lord (1 Thes. 4:17).

However, the unsaved of Christendom will be left behind to enter into the tribulation period which is being prepared to serve as Satan's harlot—"the great harlot who sits on many waters" (Rev. 17:1)—who will help facilitate the great delusion of Antichrist in the form of the world church in the first half of the tribulation. This ecumenical and apostate church will pave the way for a one-world religion—the worship of Antichrist and reception of the mark of the beast (Rev. 13:16-18) in the second half of the tribulation. It is significant to observe that Revelation 13:11-18 presents the False Prophet (head of the one world church during the tribulation) as the one who is advocating on behalf of the Antichrist that the earthdwellers should take the mark of the Beast, which will be in the form of the number six hundred, sixty, and six (Rev. 13:18). Just as the true church has as her role of declaring and making clear the truth of God, so Satan's harlot has a leading role in fostering his false, deceptive message.

The church is unique in the plan of God and separate from His plan for Israel. While the church partakes of the spiritual promises of the Abrahamic Covenant as

fulfilled through Christ, Israel, and not the church, will fulfill her national destiny as a separate entity, after the rapture and tribulation, during the millennium. The New Testament teaches that the church was an unrevealed mystery in the Old Testament (Rom. 16:25-26; Eph. 3:2-10; Col. 1:25-27), which is why she began suddenly, without warning, in Acts 2, and why this age will end suddenly and mysteriously without warning at the rapture. Therefore, the church has no earthly prophetic destiny beyond the rapture.

THE CHURCH AGE IS A DISTINCT DISPENSATION

The church age is not characterized by historically verifiable prophetic events, except her beginning on the Day of Pentecost and her ending with the rapture. But the general course of this age has been prophesied and can provide a general overview of what can be expected during this age.

Even specific prophecy that is fulfilled during the church age relates to God's prophetic plan for Israel and not directly to the church. For example, the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem and her Temple in A.D. 70 relates to Israel (Mat. 23:38; Luke 19:43-44; 21:20-24). Thus it is not inconsistent that prophetic preparations relating to Israel are already underway with the reestablishment of Israel as a nation in 1948 even though we still are living in the church age.

The course of the current church age is given to Christians in three sets of passages in the New Testament. An understanding of these passages is needed for insight into the signs of the times.

Matthew 13

The parables of Matthew 13 provide insight into the course of the current church age. Actually, since Matthew 13 surveys this present age in its relation to the kingdom the parables cover the period of time between Christ's two advents—His first and second comings. This includes the tribulation, second coming, and final judgment, after the rapture, but nevertheless includes an important overview of our present era. How does Matthew 13 depict this age? Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost summarizes the description as follows:

We may summarize the teaching as to the course of the age by saying: (1) there will be a sowing of the Word throughout the age, which (2) will be imitated by a false counter sowing; (3) the kingdom will assume huge outer proportions, but (4) be marked by inner doctrinal corruption; yet, the Lord will gain for Himself (5) a peculiar treasure from among Israel, and (6) from the church; (7) the age will end in judgment with the unrighteous excluded from the kingdom to be inaugurated and the righteous taken in to enjoy the blessing of Messiah's reign.¹

Revelation 2—3

The next major passage providing an overview of the course of this age is found in the presentation of the seven churches of Revelation 2—3. The perspective of Revelation 2—3 is in reference to the program of the church and not the kingdom. Thus, its overview proceeds from Pentecost to the rapture as indicated by the repeated phrase, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22). These seven, historical churches of the first century provide a pattern of the types of churches that will exist throughout church history.

The Last Days for the Church

The New Testament clearly speaks about the last days for the church in the Epistles. Interestingly, virtually all of these comments about the last days apostasy come from the Epistles written shortly before the death of each Apostle writing (i.e., during the last days of the various Apostles), as if to emphasize the dangers latent during the church's last days. The following is a list of the seven major passages that deal with the last days for the church: 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-5; 4:3-4; James 5:1-8; 2 Peter 2:1-22; 3:3-6; Jude 1-25. Every one of these passages emphasizes over and over again that the great characteristic of the final time of the church will be that of *apostasy*; but nevertheless effective evangelism will be taking place even until the last moments of the Church Age.

The clear course of the last days for the church consists of constant warnings to the believer to be on guard against doctrinal defection, otherwise known as apostasy. Such a characteristic provides for the Christian today a clear sign of the end of our current church age.

Even though specific prophecy is not given concerning the present church age, we have seen that three sets of passages do paint a general picture of the course of this age. All three indicate that apostasy will characterize Christendom during the time when the rapture will take place.

The New Testament teaches that the church will be removed at the rapture before the time of the tribulation begins (1 Thes. 1:10; 5:9; Rev. 3:10) and taken by Christ to the Father house (John 14:1-3). The Church will be in heaven during the tribulation, as represented by the 24 elders (Rev. 4:4, 9-11; 7:13-14; 19:4). During the seven-year tribulation on earth, the Bride will undergo the judgment seat of Christ in preparation (Rev. 19:4-10, 19) to accompany Christ during His descent at the second coming (Rev. 19:14). The heavenly preparation of the church during the tribulation is also pictured as "His bride has made herself ready" (Rev. 19:7) for the marriage of the Lamb right before the second coming. The marriage supper takes place at the beginning of the millennium, after the second coming.

While the next event for the true church—the body of Christ—is translation from earth to heaven at the rapture, those unbelievers left in the organized church as an institution will pass into the tribulation and form the base of an apostate super-church that the False Prophet will use to aid the worldwide rule of the Antichrist (Rev. 13; 17:1–18). The true church of Jesus Christ will not be a part of the tribulation.

CONCLUSION

The role of the church during the millennium, at which time all members of the church will already have received their resurrection bodies at the rapture, will be to reign and rule with Christ (Rev. 3:21). In Matthew 19:28, Jesus told His disciples, who are members of the church, that they would join Him in the kingdom and reign over the twelve tribes of Israel. Also, in 2 Timothy 2:12, Paul writes, "If we endure, we will also reign with Him." The primary purpose of the millennium is the restoration of Israel and Christ's rule over it, but the church as the Bride of Christ is not absent from millennial activities.

Scripture is not clear as to whether Israel, the church, and the other believer groups of history will maintain their distinctions throughout eternity. There does not appear to be a biblical reason why they may not worship and serve God as distinct saved people groups for all eternity. In fact, the New Jerusalem of the eternal state, indicates some distinctions such as the 12 tribes of Israel (Rev. 21:12), the 12 apostles of the church (Rev.

21:14), and the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:26). Maranatha!

ENDNOTE

† J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1965), p. 149.