

## **Eschatology and Mission: A Pentecostal Perspective<sup>1</sup>**

by Van Johnson

### **Pentecostal and Reformed Views on Time and Space**

Upon accepting the invitation to join the Reformed-Pentecostal Dialogue in Accra (Ghana) to present a paper on the theme “Mission to the Needs of the World,” I reached first for Newbigin’s classic treatment on the theology of mission, *The Open Secret*.<sup>2</sup> He depicted the current problem facing Christian missions right at the outset. It is spatial in nature. No longer will it do to externalize mission from the center of church life—with Christendom here and missions over there; the church in the right part of town and the mission church in the other. “With the radical secularization of Western culture,” he writes, “the churches are in a missionary situation in what was once Christendom.”<sup>3</sup> Further, the global rejection of the hegemonic position of the West means that the western Church no longer benefits from the advantages of colonialism’s territorial spread. Instead, Newbigin insists, she must resist colonialism and all its trappings. “And in this situation we shall find that the New Testament speaks much more directly than does the nineteenth century as we learn afresh what it means to bear witness to the gospel from a position not of strength but of weakness.”<sup>4</sup>

When the topic is mission, spatial concerns are secondary for Pentecostals. Their starting point and its consequence for mission were captured in the theme song of a short-lived American television series that ran from 1966-67, a science fiction comedy called *It’s About Time*, which featured two astronauts who traveled back to a prehistoric era. It

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<sup>1</sup>This paper is a modified version of the one delivered during the third round of the fifth session of the international dialogue between the World Communion of Reformed Churches and Classical Pentecostals in Accra, Ghana, November 29–December 4, 2018. It still retains some of its nature as an oral presentation in a dialogue format.

<sup>2</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>3</sup>Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 2.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 5.

was a comedy of dislocation: “It’s about time, it’s about space, about strange people in the strangest place.”

For a Pentecostal, it’s about time. Birthed in an atmosphere of acute expectation for the soon return of Christ, North American Pentecostalism was shaped by an abbreviated sense of time that reduced the value of space. Territorial aspirations were minimal. Indeed, like other sectarian groups, early Pentecostals even shrank what was commonly considered Christian-occupied territory. That is, the mission field not only encompassed outright pagans but also spiritually cold, so-called Christians and the properties they inhabited. Urgency, therefore, was directed toward redeeming people rather than spaces.

Their view of time affected not only their missional sensibilities but also their sense of being in this world. To restore the life and mission of the early church the Pentecostals traveled back to an ancient era, but in so doing they absorbed the New Testament (NT) emphasis on the imminent return of Jesus, which propelled them ahead to the precipice of history. Taking their cues from a world that no longer existed in preparation for one that had not yet arrived, they became strangers in the world they inhabited.

This historic view, however, is waning with time: a growing number of Pentecostals are questioning the validity of such radical time-shifting. After a century, Pentecostals realize they have more time than they once thought they did, and the possibilities for engaging in the here-and-now are becoming more apparent. Space appears redeemable, not just the people who inhabit it. Pentecostals have a new taste for redeeming the culture and bringing territory under the control of Christ.

The change in perception, initiated by a re-evaluation of the timing of Christ’s return, may signal the maturing of the classical Pentecostal movement, or, its extinction. To put it less apocalyptically, the movement may be morphing into something still Christian, still valuable for the Kingdom of God, but not Pentecostalism as such. We will revisit this below.

It seems to me that one of the reasons that the Reformed tradition prioritizes the spatial elements of eschatology over the temporal is because the doctrines of predestination and election have located the plan of God outside of time. Time has been factored in to such an extent *in advance* that it is not all that practically relevant for a Reformed view of eschatology and mission. Furthermore, the primary moments within salvation history have already occurred: Christ has died and risen in accordance with the determination of God before time itself. To quote Anthony Hoekema, in light of the victory of Christ, “the most important

day in history, therefore, is not the Second Coming of Christ which is still future but the first coming which lies in the past.”<sup>5</sup>

The problem for the Church of a delayed *parousia*<sup>6</sup> is as old as the first century, and so it is with enthusiasm that I accept Newbigin’s invitation to listen to the NT for wisdom about mission, especially about how to conduct mission when the promised return does not materialize in the expected time frame. Before concluding with observations about a Pentecostal approach to eschatology and mission, I will make a few general remarks about the relationship between the terms “eschatology” and “mission.” I will follow that up with a discussion on the relevance of apocalyptic eschatology for our deliberations. But first, I will locate my perspective in time and space.

I approach this work from a background in biblical theology. My thesis at the University of Toronto tracked the development of various visions of the afterlife in Jewish apocalyptic literature. The apocalyptic worldview that I studied provided background for both New Testament eschatology and the variant of it adopted enthusiastically by early Pentecostals.

My vantage point is that of North American Pentecostalism. I do not claim to know how eschatology fared as Pentecostalism emerged in all parts of the globe. I will speak to what I know best—North American beginnings in the early twentieth century—without presuming that its historical development is normative for all regions. Although the phrase “North American Pentecostalism” sometimes disguises differences between American and Canadian perspectives, the term here is appropriate because of a common eschatological worldview.

### Eschatology and Mission

The honor I felt when invited to join this dialogue was rivaled only by a sense of relief that the topic was “Eschatology and Mission,” because when considered at the level of God’s involvement, they form a simple equation. If the mission of God is God’s purpose to restore all creation, then eschatology describes the actualization of his intent. The problem in describing eschatology, however, starts with the realization that God calls the Church to be involved in the process, which begs the question: What exactly is our role? What we believe God has done, is doing now, and will do, shapes how we perceive our role in his mission.

I have no intention of trying to distinguish between a Pentecostal and Reformed approach to mission based on criteria like levels of

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<sup>5</sup>Anthony Hoekema, “Amillennialism,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 177.

<sup>6</sup>Or, the return of Christ.

commitment and industriousness. Although Pentecostals have a reputation for active participation, they have a whole work ethic named after them!<sup>7</sup> My contribution is a brief consideration of the role different perceptions of time and space play in variant eschatological systems and missional strategies.

Biblical eschatology describes how God keeps his promises, or covenants, to bring restoration to creation. That the term “eschatology” denotes a study of last or later things puts an emphasis on the timing aspect of God’s saving work, where timing is understood not in a calendrical or mechanical way, but as the moment when God decides to act. An eschatological moment is when God works to bring about a promised restoration.

Before Christopher Wright’s influential *The Mission of God* (2006)<sup>8</sup>—his overview of the Scriptures as one grand narrative of God’s work in the world to set it right—there was Walter Kaiser’s *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (1978).<sup>9</sup> I was fortunate enough to sit under his teaching when he was at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago, and he convinced me that the idea of the promise of God, a promise theology, was the thread that ran throughout the Old Testament (OT). Consequently, the salvific work of God begins in Genesis and runs throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

From a Christian perspective, of course, it is in the NT era, the time of the new covenant, where we find the dramatic advancement of God’s purposes. The fact that God is effecting salvation through Christ and the Spirit means that the promised last days have arrived. As my pastor Keith Smith said, “If you are waiting for the last days, you are a little late.” The span of NT time covers both what God has done (the already) and what he has yet to accomplish (the not yet), and it is in the latter that the Church’s mission is located.

If eschatology refers to God-initiated moments when he acts in salvation-history to fulfill his promises, then mission is ultimately about divine action. From what Newbigin tells us, the term “*missio Dei*” came into vogue in missionary theology in the 1960s because the World Missionary Conference in Willingen, 1952, emphasized it. He applauds

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<sup>7</sup>I have in mind the Protestant Ethic that sociologist Max Weber made famous in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-5), his study of the correlation of Calvin’s theory of predestination with the success of capitalism. In short, the insecurity for the individual believer inherent in an understanding that God chooses who is to be saved resulted in rigorous attempts to show one’s salvation through hard work and industry.

<sup>8</sup>Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup>Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

it for refreshing Augustine's position in his dispute with Pelagius: the work of salvation is God's work from beginning to end. Still, as Newbiggin warns, its popularity comes with a risk that "mission of God" be misconstrued by the Church as permission to remain on the sidelines.<sup>10</sup>

A failure to respond to a call for action is not a charge typically laid against global Pentecostalism. Rather, in a Reformed-Pentecostal dialogue, the concern might be that Pentecostals have over-emphasized their role in the mission of God, as if the Kingdom awaits the fullness of human effort. The view that the Church is called to action because Jesus is delaying his return until all peoples have heard the good news has a history in Pentecostal circles. Despite the differences around this table concerning what weight to give to the significance of human action in the plan of God, our common starting point is the conviction that the Church engages in mission because God calls her to do so.

### **Prophetic and Apocalyptic Eschatology**

Paul Hanson's categories of prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology are helpful for background on the NT perspective.<sup>11</sup> Prophetic eschatology (the primary form of eschatology in the OT) concerns the ongoing work of God in history; apocalyptic eschatology (which comes into its own in Jewish apocalyptic literature in Second Temple Judaism) tracks God's salvific actions above and beyond history. Apocalyptic eschatology builds on, and then transcends, the earthly horizon of the prophetic vision, which is largely covenantal and whose compass point is the land promised to Abraham (Gen 12,15). The glorious future anticipated by the Israelites was this-worldly and national in scope. Thus, to gauge God's faithfulness one would survey the lay of the land. Apocalyptic, however, is driven by an otherworldly shift in perspective, where time is recalculated, and the spatial realm reimagined.

A clarification about terminology is in order. The term "apocalypse," by general consent, is reserved for the genre. "Apocalyptic eschatology" is readily used to describe the kind of eschatology found in the apocalypses and in other forms of literature. The widely accepted definition of the genre apocalypse includes spatial and temporal aspects:

a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both

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<sup>10</sup>*Open Secret*, 17-18.

<sup>11</sup>Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 11.

temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world.<sup>12</sup>

Through revelation—what could never be deduced from earthly appearances—the object of human hope is transferred to a space beyond historical time. Elemental for the apocalyptic worldview is the discontinuity between this world and the next.

#### From Prophetic to Apocalyptic

Several factors had to come together to facilitate the shift from prophetic to apocalyptic thinking, one of them being a growing acceptance of individualism, i.e., the individual is an appropriate object of the covenantal relationship along with, or instead of, the nation as a whole.<sup>13</sup> This was a crucial step away from a spatial and national perception of a blessed future, but it was a spiritual crisis of national proportions that propelled the transition.

The context for the emergence of apocalyptic eschatology a few centuries before Christ, and its continued appeal among Jews leading up to the Bar Kochba revolt (132-5 CE), was a crisis of space. Hope for the fulfillment of God's promises in this world was in decline as the Greek empire gave way to the Roman. With nothing on earth to show for it, many Jews had abandoned belief in the intervention of an invisible God and embraced the ever-present power of the empire instead. This pessimism about earthly conditions caused apocalyptic visionaries to look elsewhere.

Visionary scenes, such as those found in Daniel (the one OT apocalypse) and in Revelation (the only NT apocalypse), are a staple of the genre. Specifically, it is the depiction of the seer's immediate access into the presence of God, often as part of a heavenly tour, that separates an apocalypse from a prophetic writing.<sup>14</sup> The two are also demarcated based on the content of their visionary experiences. The main events of apocalyptic eschatology that are largely absent from the OT but common in the NT—a final judgment at the end of history, resurrection to a new world for the faithful, punishment in a fiery hell for the wicked—came into popular thinking among the Jews in the Second Temple period.

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<sup>12</sup>John Collins, *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, Semeia 14 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), quoted in "What is Apocalyptic Literature?" in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. John Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>13</sup>While there is no consensus as to whether Isa 26:19 depicts a national resurrection (as in Ezek 37 and the vision of the dry bones) or a personal one (like Dan 12:2-3), this appears to me to be a rare OT example of the latter.

<sup>14</sup>John Collins, "What is Apocalyptic Literature?," 7.

Another essential element found particularly in the historical apocalypses,<sup>15</sup> i.e., those that envisage an end to history with a final judgment, is the presumption that the end is near, and therein lay the practical implications for the audience. The function of historical apocalypses was to reorient the hearers' view of their current situation, and to that end, heavenly secrets about otherworldly realities were disclosed. It was a call for right action, not speculative staring into the sky. In sum, the variable of time rises in importance, the significance of earthly space recedes, and another world comes into view for those who remain faithful to the God of Israel.

### New Testament Apocalyptic Eschatology

Although there is only one book in the NT that is an apocalypse, the worldview we have just described which shortens time and relocates redeemed space pervades the NT.<sup>16</sup> That is not to say that every NT passage is explicitly concerned with the main events of the eschaton, but those events and the worldview behind them were definitive for how the NT writers articulated the Christian faith.

The NT adaptation of apocalyptic eschatology included a redefinition of the nature of eschatological time. The end is still imminent, but in another sense, it has already arrived. NT time is split in half, each part initiated by a Messianic arrival: Jesus lived and died, establishing the new covenant in his blood, but then he left with a promise to return. Early Christians expected to see him much sooner rather than later, their situation similar to the football fan watching the end of a match: no one knows exactly when injury time is up, except for the referee, but the time will be short (especially for the team down a goal).

I take it as a given that no generation expected the soon return of Jesus more fervently than the first one. They had no sense of church history with which to temper their expectations. The earliest church had their hopes raised high, as high as the heavens, and therein lay their dilemma.

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<sup>15</sup>It is common to distinguish between two types of apocalypses: those that are historical (like Daniel, parts of 1 Enoch [Animal Apocalypse, Apocalypse of Weeks] and 4 Ezra) and those that feature an otherworldly journey (other parts of 1 Enoch [Book of the Watchers, Similitudes], and Testament of Abraham). What ties them together is "a transcendent eschatology that looks for retribution beyond the bounds of history" (John Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 15).

<sup>16</sup>Adela Y. Collins, "Apocalypticism and Christian Origins," in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. John Collins (Oxford University Press, 2014).

*Luke's Perceptions*

Hans Conzelmann made the case that Luke responded to the delay of the *parousia* by writing Acts, thereby creating a Church Age.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, what Luke accomplishes is the transformation of the delay from a dilemma into an essential aspect of the divine plan. Without endorsing all of Conzelmann's arguments, I think his perception of Luke's sensitivity to the issue of the non-return is correct. Luke writes two volumes rather than just a gospel to encourage the completion of what Jesus initiated. The incipit of Acts (which links to the full prologue in Luke 1:1-4) sets up volume two as a continuation narrative by declaring that the first volume *concerned "all that Jesus began to do and to teach"* (Acts 1:1).<sup>18</sup> The proclamation of the Kingdom inaugurated by Christ is to be continued by empowered witnesses until he returns. The opening scene in Acts illustrates this well. Jesus warns them off speculation about when the Kingdom will come and redirects their energies toward witness. He then ascends, they stare into heaven, and two men appear and ask: "*Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?*" (Acts 1:11). That is, stop looking up and start looking around, there is something to do. The story of Acts is the record of what they did, written to encourage the Church to carry on in likewise manner.

*Paul's Varied Perceptions*

If Luke writes with sensitivity to the temporal situation of the early church, Paul does so even more. As part of my doctoral studies, I took a course on Paul with John Hurd at Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto, where the assignment was a diachronic analysis of Pauline theology to track changing emphases from the earlier letters to the later ones.

Hurd placed the Thessalonian letters at the starting point. The pastoral issue that Paul addresses in 1 Thessalonians regarding the fate of Christians dying before the *parousia* is one of the clues to its early date. While later Christians would take death as a given and wrestle with the nature of death for the Christian—e.g., concerns about burials and the interim state—what the Thessalonians wanted to know within 20 years of Jesus' ascension was how to factor in death at all. Such confusion is consonant with their first-generation Christian belief in an imminent return.

My work in Hurd's course traced how Paul varied his eschatological expressions diachronically: with the passage of time, Paul increased the

<sup>17</sup>Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of Saint Luke* (New York: Harper, 1961).

<sup>18</sup>All Scripture references are from the *New International Version*, 1984.

range of his references to the realized aspects of eschatology without abandoning his “not yet” perspective. For instance, Paul’s resurrection language broadens. He refuses to say in the baptismal passage of Rom 6:1-14 that believers are already raised with Christ, even though he affirms repeatedly in the same text that they have died with him. This reservation disappears with his explicit declaration in Col 3:1 that those in Christ are already raised with him. It is also clear that with time he changes his perception of his own destiny: compare the confident statement in 1Thess 4:17 about “*we who are still alive and are left*” with his confession at the beginning of Philippians that he may die and go to be with the Lord (1:20-1).

At an earlier stage of ministry Paul was even a cessationist about marriage. In one of the more ignored chapters in the Pauline letters, 1Cor 7, he makes a strong appeal for believers to remain single because of the imminent *parousia*. The call for such radical action, combined with an injunction that slaves not seek their freedom, is justified by the “*present crisis*” (v. 26): “*What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none*” (v. 29). This is a far cry from the household counsel he gives later in the letter to the Ephesians, “*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church*” (5:25). To summarize, Paul appears to vary terminology and pastoral counsel in response to the continued delay of Christ’s return.

Paul actually addresses the reason for the delay in Romans 9-11, where the topic is the future of Israel. The failure of his own people to be the ones leading the way into the Kingdom of God has raised the issue of God’s faithfulness. With deep emotion and an avowal that his mission to the Gentiles is not a betrayal of his own people, Paul explains the growing disparity in numbers between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the light of God’s mercy. Because of his mercy the Gentiles are being grafted in, for this is their time. When *the “full number of the Gentiles has come in,”* then all Israel will be saved (11:25-6). The time of Christ’s return, which will trigger the resurrection, ultimately hinges on Israel’s acceptance of Messiah. “*For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?*” (11:15).

Whereas we have multiple letters of Paul to examine for the nature of his eschatological expressions, any consideration of the effect of a delayed *parousia* on Paul’s missionary strategies is limited to Acts (and to a few travelogue entries in his letters). Acts depicts the apostle as the itinerant missionary until the very end, and one who was intent on extending the gospel’s geographical reach. Much the same picture emerges in Romans: “*by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit*” he has completed a cycle of ministry from Jerusalem to Illyricum (15:19), and now he is ready to begin a new chapter with a

journey to Spain (15:24). What should be noted, though, is his explanation to them that he must go home to Jerusalem before he journeys to Rome, because he had made a commitment to remember the poor there,<sup>19</sup> and he was on his way with the offering he had collected (Rom 15:25-29). For Paul, urgency in mission did not mean abandoning the poor and the commitment he had made.

### **Eschatology and Mission in Pentecostalism**

#### Urgency and other Early Characteristics

If the Reformed Tradition has a preferential option for Romans and Galatians, then Pentecostals do so for Acts (and the gospels in general). Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on one's view, early Pentecostals were blissfully unaware of the dictum that doctrine comes from didactic passages, not historical narratives. Consequently, when reading the gospels and Acts they did not approach them as one might who visits a museum exhibit to stand behind glass or rope in order to peer into a different time and space. They were not observers; they thought they were in the exhibit.

As restorationists, they perceived no historical distance between them and the early church, and here we should recognize the contribution of cessationism. The early Pentecostals were quite aware of the theory, and they seemed to have taken its basic premise to heart that the charismata had ceased. Therefore, it was the return of Spirit Baptism and the gifts among them that shaped their self-understanding as a restoration movement. While some early Pentecostal writers recognized redeeming moments in church history (usually from the period of the Reformation onwards), it was the return of tongues that marked the culmination of the restoration period.

On account of their preferential option for Acts and, in particular, Acts 2, Pentecostalism was a missional movement from birth. Their understanding of Spirit Baptism was eschatological because of Peter's quotation from Joel: "*In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people*" (Acts 2:17a), and it was missional because of Jesus' instructions in Acts 1:8. "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*"

These texts—Acts 1:8 as promise and Acts 2 as fulfillment—functioned together in early Pentecostalism to fashion a missional movement marked by urgency, inclusivism, and an openness to both

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<sup>19</sup>Galatians 2:10.

revelation and the role of signs and wonders in evangelism. As we will see below, in sociological terms they were value-oriented rather than norm-oriented. From a missiological perspective, early Pentecostal mission was not spatially stratified, as if mission occurred somewhere else. The missionary sending church was also itself a missional church.

If apocalyptic expectation put the promises of God on the clock, then Pentecostals set their watches fast. Urgency, in the spirit of 1 Cor 7, meant that desperate times called for prioritizing one's actions in light of the world to come. Worldly pleasures were identified and denounced. Earthly aspirations were replaced by future considerations. Most importantly, it was their sense of time that channeled their interpretation of Spirit Baptism in a missional direction, thereby preserving Jesus' intent that empowerment be for the sake of others rather than for personal benefit.

### *Inclusivity*

Secondly, urgency supported the high value they placed on inclusivity. An early Pentecostal conviction that God would unite all Christians sprung from the belief in a church renewed by the Spirit acting in concert in mission. On this count, the Pentecostal tradition has failed miserably. A horrendous record of dividing and splintering in the global Pentecostal community is a historic betrayal of an early vision, which makes this Reformed-Pentecostal dialogue in Accra (as well as other inter-faith dialogues involving Pentecostals) part of our penance.

There was greater success at the congregational level, where an egalitarian spirit pervaded mission. It made no practical sense to relegate women to the sidelines as cheerleaders when there were not enough workers to cheer on. Racial barriers appeared to lower, at least for a time, and here Azusa Street is the shining example of what can happen when mission overrides all else. Of course, the prominence of women in the Holiness movement that preceded Pentecostalism reminds us that there is an older heritage at work. Indeed, their shared heritage of inclusivity has much to do with the fact that they both began as movements: a fundamental characteristic of a movement is that everyone participates.

The "all flesh" reference of Joel 2:28 grounded the Pentecostal insistence that Spirit Baptism, with speaking in tongues, was for all without distinction. Pentecostals involved women, choosing to see their Spirit Baptism and giftings as qualitatively the same as those of men. It was when the movement transitioned into denominations that women began to lose out; when the criteria of calling was supplanted by the criteria of authority, women were put in their place.

Their churches grew because of mentoring that the transforming presence of God was intended to benefit others. Men and women, young and old, testified to conversion, Spirit Baptism and healing wherever they went: in church, at work and at home. With that type of missional heritage, Pentecostals have a traditional aversion to any type of church mission that relies solely on those who minister on church platforms.<sup>20</sup> The mentoring of a missional way of living came from various directions: from the platform in preaching and teaching, from the floor through prayers and testimonies, and from the prayer room, where the energy of the service was concentrated in a missional direction.

My memories of the Pentecostal church that my dad pastored in Montreal are most vivid when I remember the Sunday night meetings, which were more routine than frenetic. If an observer had wandered in at 6 p.m., and many did, they might have concluded that what was going on had no rhyme or reason. But if they stayed around, the lasting impression was different, because standing and rejoicing in the presence of the Lord was only our first move. We had a three-step routine: standing, kneeling, and going out. We stood in praise, and then we knelt in prayer. Every Sunday night ended up in the prayer room, where we interceded for others. After we had knelt, we then executed our signature move. We went out. Going home signified going out into the world, with a new week in front of us to do something for Jesus.

#### *Apocalyptic Epistemology*

The third characteristic of Pentecostal mission was an apocalyptic epistemology, a belief in revelation that informs text and tradition. For early Pentecostals, this was not a replacement for the Bible, nor a higher form of revelation than the written text. Its currency among them followed from their reading of the Bible as restorationists. As dreams and visions guided the early mission in Acts, as the Spirit spoke in ways that led the first believers, so it was with them. Although their revelatory experiences differed, they were like jazz improvisations on a standard theme, Jesus is coming soon. What they saw was the glory of heaven or the horror of hell; what they heard was encouragement to be ready for his return and exhortation to evangelize quickly.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Cecil Robeck notes the significant role of street meetings and neighbourhood evangelism for the Apostolic Faith Mission. Even the most famous Pentecostal revival depended on workers going out to witness (*The Azusa Street Mission and Revival: The Birth of the Global Pentecostal Movement* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 108-9.

<sup>21</sup>According to Jacobsen, while a belief in the soon return of Jesus was acute at The Apostolic Faith Mission in L.A., they devoted little space in their newsletters to speculation about eschatological details (*Thinking in the Spirit: Theologies of the Early Pentecostal Movement* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 80-1. On

One Canadian example will make the point. At the end of *The Promise* (No. 1)<sup>22</sup>—the first newsletter from Toronto, where Pentecostalism began in Canada in November 1906—the leader of the revival, Ellen Hebden, posted a poem she claimed originated in a revelation that was expressed with tongues and interpretation. Written as the words of Jesus, the first stanza recalls the cross, and the second reads this way: “I soon shall be returning / To fetch my precious bride / And then amid great glory / I’ll place her by my side.”<sup>23</sup> The Promise is being fulfilled and the Lord is returning.

Before considering a few aspects of missionary work among Pentecostals, it is helpful to note that a determination to do missions globally was a primary reason Pentecostals organized in the first place. At least this was the experience of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC) and the Assemblies of God, U.S. Despite their reticence to organize formally, individual congregations alone could not meet the financial demands of their missional aspirations to send out workers to the ends of the earth. Coordinated action with other churches was the only pragmatic solution.

### *Pragmatism*

Like Paul, who celebrated the freedom of being single because time was short, early Pentecostals engaged in mission with little of the time-consuming prerequisites mission boards now (rightly) insist on. Missionaries went without aptitude testing, language training and with little awareness of the cultural barriers they would face. Indeed, some of the earliest from North America set out with confidence that language barriers would dissolve on arrival. The belief in xenolalia as a missionary tool had circulated in some nineteenth century holiness groups and had made its way to Azusa via the influence of Charles Parham. A belief that every legitimate form of tongues speech was an earthly language was seemingly tailor-made for a community in a hurry. When Pentecostals arrived on foreign shores, convinced they could witness by speaking in tongues, the results were certainly comic. The locals, including the Protestant missionaries already stationed there, were watching a comedy of displacement: strange people in the strangest place. If necessity is the

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the other hand, *The Apostolic Messenger* (Vol. 1, No. 1), published by A.H. Argue in Winnipeg (February and March 1908), was filled with detailed dispensational explanations.

<sup>22</sup>*The Promise*, No. 1 (May 1907), 4. This is the first edition of a series (most of which are not extant) published at the East End Mission in Toronto by missionaries Ellen and James Hebden from Yorkshire, England.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

mother of invention, then for Pentecostals, missional urgency is the mother of pragmatism.

Grant Wacker argued convincingly that Pentecostalism survived and thrived because its approach combined an otherworldly, or primitive perspective, with a rigorous pragmatism: when ideas failed, adjustments were made.<sup>24</sup> Their handling of xenolalia is a case in point. Many Pentecostal missionaries were undeterred by their inability to preach in tongues; they learned the local language and carried on. And they had other means of showing the gospel. Their belief in the power of God served them well overseas, where the public practices of healing and deliverance communicated the power of God to confused, but intrigued, local audiences. Furthermore, they were naturally inclined to trust indigenous leadership.<sup>25</sup> Their tendency to appoint local leadership and keep moving rather than set up mission stations derived from convictions part theological—that the gifts were for all—and part eschatological—Christ’s imminent return required speed and agility to finish the job.

### *Salvation and Social Action*

The historic disagreement among Protestant missionary societies regarding the proper aim of missionary activity, whether that be the salvation of the soul or care for the body, preceded the first batch of Pentecostal missionaries in the early 1900s.<sup>26</sup> In Neil Smelser’s treatment of the nature of social movements, *Theory of Collective Behavior*,<sup>27</sup> he divided social movements into two classes: value-oriented and norm-oriented. The former attempts to change the values of individuals, and the latter, the norms of society. Generally speaking, along with many other conservative evangelicals, Pentecostals fit into the value-oriented category—a classification reflected in their prioritization of evangelism.

Having said that, such a classification is a bit of an awkward fit for Pentecostalism. As a movement of the poor and the marginalized, a distinction between care for the soul and care for the body is somewhat

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<sup>24</sup>Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). The interplay between early Pentecostal otherworldliness and pragmatism is one that he develops throughout the book. See in particular his opening chapter.

<sup>25</sup>The book for Pentecostals was Melvin Hodges, *The Indigenous Church* (Springfield, MO.: Gospel Publishing House, 1953).

<sup>26</sup>Note the case study of early Pentecostal missions in China by Daniel Bays, “The Protestant Missionary Establishment and the Pentecostal Movement,” in *Pentecostal Currents in American Protestantism*, eds. E. Blumhofer, R. Spittler and G. Wacker (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 50-67.

<sup>27</sup>Neil Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (New York: The Free Press, 1962).

artificial. As Douglas Petersen asserts in *Not by Might, Nor by Power: A Pentecostal Theology of Social Concern in Latin America*, extending care is natural for Pentecostals because they are the poor.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, Pentecostals perceive cosmological space as filled with angels and demons, whose activities influence everyday life. This apocalyptic sense of space, what Luther called a world “with devils filled” in his hymn “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” remains a given across the global movement. With such a starting point, salvation cannot be reduced to an interior change within the individual because the effects of demonic activity are external. Deliverance breaks the power of sin in its external and social effects, bringing healing to the body and restoration to relationships, and sometimes it even breaks the cycle of poverty.

The final reason why a classification that drives a wedge between spiritual and social care is too rigid for an understanding of Pentecostalism is seen in global trends, where outreach has moved beyond the organic to a more structured form of engagement in the social and political arenas.<sup>29</sup> Obviously, such a transition presupposes a more expansive view of time than what I have associated with the early Pentecostals in North America. In the discussion on millennial beliefs below, I will consider whether Pentecostalism can expand its vision for the renewal of earthly space without compromising her premillennial convictions that wholly redeemed space can only materialize after Jesus does.

### Eschatological Expressions in Pentecostalism

#### Former and Latter Rain

Early Pentecostals had several systems to express their eschatology. Among them was the typology of the Former and Latter Rain, which they borrowed from A.B. Simpson. Based on the rainfall patterns in Israel, where the early rain accompanied planting and the latter, the harvest, Simpson had argued that first-century Pentecost was the former rain and what they were expecting would be one last great deluge of the Spirit.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Douglas Petersen, *Not by Might, Nor by Power: A Pentecostal Theology of Social Concern in Latin America* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 1996).

<sup>29</sup>D. Miller and T. Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>30</sup>No one developed this more thoroughly than Wesley Myland in *The Latter Rain Covenant and Pentecostal Power with Testimony of Healings and Baptism* (Chicago: Evangel Publishing House, 1910). Another early eschatological framework was modeled on the first week of creation: as God worked for six days then rested, so after 6,000 years our millennial rest is at hand (“The Millennium,” *Apostolic Faith* [Sep 1906], 3). There is

Pentecostals applied this to themselves, grounding their eschatological perspective in their encounters with God through the Spirit. Eschatological hope was a living hope rather than something speculative because they were experiencing the eschaton in a dramatic and personal way. They testified often about how their experiences in the Spirit led to deeper intimacy with Jesus. This is a crucial point for a Pentecostal understanding of eschatology and mission. It was their love for Jesus that compelled their longing to see him again and that same love that drove them to others. The heart of Pentecostal eschatology and mission is rooted in the affections.

#### Dispensationalism and the Millennium

Pentecostals had the eschaton in their hearts, but also on the charts. Pentecostals adopted a complex form of premillennialism, which was quite influential at the time of their emergence in the 1900s. Dispensationalism, a periodization of history, featured an end-times scenario of Rapture, a seven-year Tribulation, the return of Christ and the Judgment, followed by a one thousand year (millennial) reign of Christ and Christian martyrs on the earth (Rev 20). Dispensationalism seemed an irresistible grace for many Pentecostals: a whole system (with abundant Bible references and with diagrams) that proved the imminent *parousia*.

We now turn to a consideration of a millennium and what it says about redeemed space, because the various understandings associated with it have missional implications.

With its amillennial approach, the Reformed tradition has largely stayed out of the debates on the millennium: the thousand-year period referred to repeatedly in Rev 20 is not to be taken literally; the number is symbolic for the reign of God in the present age that began at the first coming of Christ. A literal millennium continues to be an issue in Pentecostalism, though, partly because of the heritage of Dispensationalism.<sup>31</sup> Although Dispensationalism has waned in influence in my circles, along with a broader distaste for systems, which includes ambivalence about a millennial period, there is something larger at stake here as we consider how eschatology relates to mission. Even if we eschew the systems, there are lingering predispositions surrounding a

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Promise theology in Toronto, imported from the UK and influenced by Ellen Hebden's involvement in the Pentecostal League of Prayer and its publication, *Tongues of Fire*.

<sup>31</sup>George Ladd, in *The Blessed Hope: A Biblical Study of The Second Advent and The Rapture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), argues that premillennialism is an ancient belief, whereas the Rapture is a modern variant. His point: one need not believe in the Rapture to be a premillennialist. See in particular the Introduction (5-14).

millennium that deserve consideration. While amillennialism is making some inroads into Pentecostal circles, especially among our academics and younger pastors, there are two primary categories that remain relevant in the broader Pentecostal-Charismatic world: premillennialism and postmillennialism.

The premillennial view, the standard one in historic Pentecostalism, insists that before the golden age Jesus must return. Thus, the disposition behind this view is that of a pessimistic optimist: pessimism about this world combined with optimism that Jesus is coming—the signs of the world’s demise show that deliverance is at hand. I think on this matter Pentecostals have the mind of Paul. His definition of hope, particularly when he mentions hope along with faith and love (e.g., Eph 1:15-18; Col 1:4-5), is hope for the next world rather than the present.

Postmillennialism is a view that the millennium occurs during the Church Age, and Jesus will return after a golden age of righteousness and peace has been ushered in. Donald Dayton argues that a “latter-day glory” of the Church was expected in both Puritanism and Pietism.<sup>32</sup> To the trajectory of advocates for postmillennialism, through the Great Awakening and into the nineteenth century, we may add some segments of the current Charismatic Movement, where the global success of Church renewal seems to portend a bright future for the Church and the globe.<sup>33</sup> Such optimism is attractive: 1) it adds value to human effort and importance to the work of the Church, and 2) it resonates with the cultural narrative that socially engineered evolutionary progress is in our grasp.

Premillennialism, with its belief in a sudden and complete transformation at Jesus’ return, reflects the view that the mission of God is ultimately better defined as revival (i.e., as re-creation, life from death, the saved from the lost), than as renewal (i.e., as refurbishing, as a process where the marred is repaired until it takes on the original form). In concert with apocalyptic thinking about the disconnect between this world and the glorious one to come, premillennialism longs for this world to be replaced. Pentecostals take quite literally the “new” in Rev 21:1, “*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.*”

Postmillennialism seems a reworking of prophetic eschatology inasmuch as it anticipates space will be redeemed within historical time. The earth is renewed because Jesus is reigning and the Church is being obedient. Change occurs in society as a renewing process, much like it

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<sup>32</sup>Donald Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1987), 147-8.

<sup>33</sup>Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 310.

does for the individual in Wesleyan perfectionism. Although Dayton argues that Wesley is difficult to pin down as to his preferred view of the millennium, his combination of Arminianism and perfectionism trended toward a vision of the future that was not just personal but also social in scope.<sup>34</sup> As we cooperate with the Spirit, change is going to come, here and now.

In short, while the millennium may no longer generate the interest it once did in some Pentecostal circles, the dispositions associated with the prefixes of “pre” and “post” remain critical to a discussion about the mission of God. To revisit Newbigin’s warning that it matters how we define God’s work, and his concern that we might misconstrue the championing of the *missio Dei* as making the Church negligible, I have the opposite concern about the postmillennial disposition—that it sidelines the work of our Lord. We believe, of course, that the Lord works through his Church, but that does not negate the danger that the medium itself might be taken too seriously, with the result that we sanction the work of our hands and declare them to be the Kingdom of God. I do believe in depravity when it comes to the Church’s actions in this world.<sup>35</sup> There are “slave castles” within a few hours’ drive of us on the coast of Ghana built by Christians.

### **What of Today?**

#### Previewing the Kingdom

To pick up the issue raised earlier, does an extended involvement by Pentecostals in the affairs of this world compromise or negate the nature of their otherworldly hope? Time and space do not permit an extended discussion, so my comments are merely suggestive for further research by Pentecostal scholars. The core of the issue, I believe, is whether time will continue to play a determining role in our missional praxis. That is, will decisions be made about how to redeem space after the nature of apocalyptic time has been factored in?

The biblical terminology of “sign” seems a propitious starting point when considering social engagement because the term functions to signify something other than itself. If we plan our work in this world, whether in church or outside of it, as a sign of the future, we may avoid building for building’s sake. Since it is God who will build his kingdom, the works of our hands preview the coming Kingdom rather than construct it. Our objective for constructive work, then, is to erect signs of the coming Kingdom, even if those structures are only temporary.

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<sup>34</sup>Dayton, *Theological Roots*, 152-3.

<sup>35</sup>See any Church history textbook.

This terminology is amenable to Pentecostals because we believe in the power of signs and wonders to show the world its future—as our Lord taught us. Lazarus died twice. The woman healed of an issue of blood eventually succumbed to some other condition. Nevertheless, though the effects of Jesus’ acts in reviving one and healing the other were not permanent, they were previews of a coming Kingdom without death, or mourning, or crying, or pain.

Pertinent to this discussion is Keith Warrington’s observation in his survey of current Pentecostal scholarship that Pentecostals have latched onto Kingdom of God language in their attempt to adjust to the delay in the return of Jesus.<sup>36</sup> As I have argued, there is a Pauline precedent for change in vocabulary as eschatological perceptions shift, and the Kingdom of God supplies a rich theological category for a Pentecostal reexamination of the nature of Jesus’ mission in order to reframe its own. To begin with, Kingdom of God theology affirms a preferential option for the poor (Luke 4:17-19). A reemphasis on this aspect of the Kingdom is of greater necessity for richer communities than for regions where care for the poor is only business as usual. For a Pentecostal, though, social concerns will never trump concern for the spiritual condition of the individual. We believe that the most important eschatological events are yet to come. The next life is the one to mind, with a judgment, a resurrection, a heaven and a hell.

Therein, however, lies a dilemma: the temptation to depredate this world in the process, especially when this is exacerbated by a Rapture theology that emphasizes escape from this world before the worst sets in. It should be said, however, that such an attitude about the environment is not a necessary corollary of the belief that perfection lies in another world. Premillennial eschatology is not the root of the problem, nor is a different type of eschatology, which views this planet as our eternal home, its necessary solution. Rather, concern about how we treat the earth and all God’s creatures on it is mandatory because of the creation narrative, which includes the divine command to reflect God’s image by ruling, not destroying, the earth (Gen 1:26-8). Scripture is clear that God will restore all things (Rom 8:19-21), and until then premillennialists should glorify God by minding the carbon footprints of their missional roaming around his creation.

#### Forward Leaning and Upward Focused

There is a lot at stake for us Pentecostals in the attempt to expand our sense of earthly space while maintaining the priority of time. We

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<sup>36</sup>Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology*, 312-13.

were raised up as a forward leaning movement, pressing toward the end with the brevity of time a constant motivation. For us, the main events of eschatology are still to be fulfilled. While we have a healthy dose of Protestant/Reformed thinking about “the already” of the cross and resurrection, we have not lost our sense of the importance of Judgment Day, which is the Day of salvation. A Pauline text in this regard is Rom 5:9-11, which declares we are justified now and reconciled now, but saved from wrath on that day.

Thus we identify with Paul who depicts himself as a runner who is in constant training so as not to be disqualified from winning the prize (1Cor 9:24-27). We are forward leaning in how we think about salvation. We are also upward focused because our cosmological sensibilities tell us that there is a world parallel to ours, invisible but felt, where angels and demons pervade, and above them, Jesus our Lord seated at the right hand of God. It is Jesus’ return for which we long, and our hearts drive us forward to include others in the company of the redeemed.

#### A Robust Eschatology

Traditionally, a robust eschatology for Pentecostals is one that is both proclaimed and lived. This tradition may be in jeopardy due to the current lack of preaching about Christ’s return. One of the repercussions of Dispensationalism’s fall from grace in some quarters of Pentecostalism<sup>37</sup> is a general de-emphasis on eschatology. Pastors trained in preaching the return of Jesus as part of an elaborate system may be at a loss to do so without it. Or, they may be suffering from eschatological fatigue and want to avoid the subject altogether.

To that end, the PAOC is refreshing its statement of faith (“Statement of Fundamental and Essential Truths”) to emphasize the main events of eschatology without favoring any system. The project is meant to revive preaching about the great hope of Christ’s return by untethering it from systems that are subject to theological and cultural climate change. Such preaching is vital for Pentecostal health. For instance, it continues to anchor the last-days’ conviction that Spirit Baptism is intended for witness instead of personal benefit. Pentecostalism didn’t circle the globe because the first participants only

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<sup>37</sup>Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology*, 310-313. Warrington gives several reasons why Dispensationalism, and in particular, the Rapture of the Church and a 7-year Tribulation preceding the return of Christ to earth, has fallen out of favour with a growing number of Pentecostals (e.g., the delay in Christ’s return after years of intense expectation; the upward mobility of some Pentecostals, which decreases the desire for another world [313]). What he does not do, unfortunately, is distinguish between Premillennialism and Dispensationalism as a variant of it. One can hold to the former without adhering to the latter.

spoke in tongues. Preaching the biblical text systematically, rather than preaching a system, will afford many opportunities to engage eschatology, because references to the *parousia* as well as other eschatological events permeate the NT.

There is another factor here, and I am wondering if the problem is really a distaste for the apocalyptic worldview itself, which is out of sync with the world-embracing theological currents circling the globe. In the field of biblical studies, the lines are still drawn between those who accept an apocalyptic Jesus and those who find the idea an embarrassment, attributing its origin to the imagination of the early church.<sup>38</sup> There may be a similar sentiment among some Pentecostals. While accepting the NT depiction of Jesus and his eschatological teaching, they are embarrassed for having trumpeted his imminent return, and now find themselves left behind in the pursuit of the more spatial elements of Kingdom work.

### Conclusion

To conclude, we discussed earlier that a diachronic analysis of Pauline eschatology suggests that with the continued delay of the return of Christ, Pauline terminology became more realized, that is, it trended toward the “already” rather than the “not yet.” If this is indicative of a trajectory within the NT as a whole, one might suppose that Revelation, a Christian apocalypse with multiple visions depicting an unrealized otherworldly future, might have been written quite early—around the same time as, say, 1 Thessalonians.

Instead, the dating of Revelation is surely towards the end of the first century (80s or 90s), when the Church was facing another chapter in a tragedy of dislocation with no earthly hope in sight. From all appearances, the Roman empire was still firmly entrenched, and its claim to absolute power emboldened by blasphemous declarations. Emperor Domitian welcomed the people’s acclamation of him as “our Lord and God.”<sup>39</sup> The Romans saw the Christians not just as subjects, but as strange people; the Christians saw themselves as foreigners in a strange land. Most importantly, though, in Revelation they saw Jesus above space and beyond time.

From a chronological and canonical standpoint, Revelation’s function as the final book is strategic for the orientation of the Church’s

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<sup>38</sup>A. Hultgren, “Eschatology in the New Testament: The Current Debate,” in *The Last Things: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Eschatology*, eds. C. Braaten and R. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 2002).

<sup>39</sup>Paul Achtemeier, Joel Green, and Marianne Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 572-3.

mission. As we engage in preparation for Christ's return, the Lord comes to us in a series of world-altering visions, with the Lamb that was slain, the one who overcame evil, in the foreground. May we overcome, then, until he comes, which will be sooner rather than later. In the stunning closing chapter of Revelation, Jesus speaks three times and each time repeats: "I am coming soon" (22:7, 12, 20). If that reminder was needed at the end of the first century, then may our response two millennia later be: "Come quickly Lord, when our longing will be replaced by reunion, and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And, may you find us fully engaged in the mission that befits your soon coming."

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