



The Importance of Being Eschatological: Providing Clarity and Direction for the Local Church

Stephen Kuhrt argues that hope is something that should be setting the agenda and direction of the Church. A shift towards a more biblical eschatology will have significant practical implications in terms of the Church's ministry and mission.



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Hope is vital for the Church. Put like this, there are probably few Christians who would disagree with this statement. Hope for the future is, after all, something that clearly lies at the heart of faith in Jesus Christ. When such a statement is made, however, it is largely understood (certainly within the culture of the modern west) in terms of the individual security that it can bring to Christians about their future; as something that can help them in the present through bringing them personal comfort about what awaits them (and hopefully their loved ones) after their death. Very rarely is the Christian hope seen as something that should be setting the agenda and direction of the Church. Paradoxically, this very lack of reflection will often then result in a default agenda which goes largely unquestioned.

At the root of this problem is an ongoing vagueness amongst the majority of Western Christians about the hope presented to them in the Bible. Ask pretty much any churchgoer (or, indeed, non-churchgoer) in this country to summarise the Christian hope (including those who would insist they are 'Bible-believing Christians') and a remarkable consensus is present: the Christian hope is about 'going to heaven when you die'. Rather than being explicitly taught or proclaimed within churches (other than perhaps at funerals), this understanding of the Christian hope more commonly operates as an ingrained assumption rarely meeting with any significant challenge. There might be disagreement about who will get to heaven and the means through which they will gain entry but the consensus about this being 'what Christians believe' remains as strong as ever.

The result of this has been to give much of the Western Church and its Christianity a sense of being essentially escapist and withdrawn from 'the real world', partly explaining its failure to attract many of those seeking a really positive message about what this life is all about. Where churches in Britain are bucking the trend of decline and thriving, it is usually because they are providing very practical things *within this world* such as the forgiveness, acceptance, guidance, community and purpose that can be found through belonging to a people united in Jesus Christ. Much of the time, however, these things are largely being provided *despite* the understanding of the Christian hope within these churches rather than because of it. Much of church life can thus be dynamic and life-changing to people and communities but with the theology that has the potential to make full sense of this and then extend its application lagging somewhat badly behind. If this is going to change, then churches and particularly their leaders have got to become far more serious about what the Bible actually says about the Christian hope and bring their eschatology (i.e. their understanding of how God is going 'to make it all end up') more fully in line with its contents.¹

And these days there is far less excuse for remaining hazy about the Christian hope, chiefly through the accessible biblical scholarship of Tom Wright. Of all Wright's achievements, perhaps the most significant has been to provide a much clearer exposition of the eschatology which has always been clear within the Bible but which few have been willing to draw out, possibly through their intuition that it would lead to accelerated change within the Church's agenda. Here

Wright has been emphatic in declaring that 'going to heaven when you die' is an inadequate and sub-biblical way of summarising the Christian hope. When those who belong to Jesus die, they *do* go 'to be with the Lord' and since the ascended Jesus is now in heaven, it is not wrong to speak of the Christian departed having gone there. But it is wrong to portray this as the sum of the Christian hope. As Tom Wright has said, the major focus of hope within the New Testament is not upon 'life after death' but 'life *after*, "life after death"' and a properly Christian eschatology that takes seriously the contents of Romans 8, 1 Corinthians 15, 1 Thessalonians 4 and Revelation 21 will proclaim God's promise to bring one day a new heavens and a new earth fully and finally joined together. Rather than those belonging to Jesus being removed from the earth and taken to another place, the New Testament consistently speaks of the resurrection of God's people to take their place within a physical world that has similarly been remade and transformed. This will then result in those renewed in God's image finally being able to fulfil the original mandate they were given in creation of ruling this world for him. It was this promised future that was inaugurated through the ministry and resurrection of Jesus Christ and is summarised in the petition within the Lord's Prayer for God's kingdom (or sovereign rule) to come 'on earth as it is in heaven'.²

Much of Wright's further work (in both its academic and more popular forms) has then sought to show how this eschatology should change the agenda of Christian churches since their whole task is then understood as that of cooperating with the work of God's Spirit as he brings more of God's future rule into this world ahead of the day when Jesus returns and this process is made complete.³ Rather than being 'escapist', biblical eschatology and the Christian hope is thus revealed to be radical, practical and completely vital for reinvigorating the twenty-first century church through the clarity and purpose that it provides for its mission and ministry.

My own personal discovery has been to see the huge difference that can occur within a local church when a clear exposition of biblical eschatology replaces the inadequate and sub-biblical hope of 'going to heaven when you die'. The following examples are just some of those drawn from my experience of seeking to implement these principles with the church of which I am Vicar – Christ Church, New Malden within Southwark Diocese of the Church of England.⁴

Greater clarity in pastoral care

As mentioned, one of the chief reasons that 'going to heaven when you die' has so tenaciously retained its status as 'the Christian hope' is the personal comfort that it is perceived to bring to people. 'They've gone to a better place', 'They're now in glory' and other popular expressions sum up this perspective and the difference that it makes to those who are bereaved or approaching their own death means that it is all too easy to kick into touch any meaningful talk of resurrection into a physical

new creation. Indeed, the anger that can result from any questioning of 'the hope of heaven' is enough to make most clergy completely duck the issue of how pastoral care and the taking of funerals might look when informed by a more biblical eschatology.

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However, my experience during ten years of pastoral ministry at Christ Church is that nothing is lost and plenty is gained when this is attempted. Those who are followers of Jesus Christ (or bereaved for those that are) can still be strongly assured that when they die, Christians will go to be with him completely freed from pain and discomfort. But this can be accompanied by an even more exciting and engaging vision of what God then has in store for them in the form of their restoration after that to become the people God made them to be, through playing their full role within his renewed and transformed creation.

The benefits of this within pastoral care are striking since it provides a very significant affirmation of the goodness of creation and the physical life that we are given to enjoy, rather than implying that it is somehow more spiritual to sit lightly to these things. Just one example of this is the way that it enables 'tributes' to the deceased at funerals (whether given by the clergy or mourners) to be more easily integrated with their message of hope since the very best that has been present in the lives of those who have died (whether through use of their God-given gifts or their love for others) can be seen as a reliable indicator of (at least part of) the crucial role that God has planned for his redeemed human beings within the new creation.

Rather than neglecting the truth of Genesis 3 and its continuing reverberations throughout the Bible, such an eschatology allows a doctrine of the fall to take its proper place without obliterating the doctrine of creation beginning in Genesis 1 and 2 and equally affirmed throughout the biblical narrative. In pastoral terms, it provides a very effective connection with the perplexity many feel through their innate sense of what the world could be like (and the glimpses they receive of this), their experience of its frequently harsh reality and their consequent longing for the first to overcome the second. Proclaiming the hope of resurrection and new creation rather than 'going to heaven when you die' enables all of this to be properly engaged with rather than avoided and in the process rebuffs the damaging (and sometimes accurate) accusation that Christianity is about fleeing from the world rather than properly engaging with its reality.

The endorsement of 'Life to the Full' in Jesus Christ

This eschatology then leads to a much more positive vision of life in the present since the Christian life then

NOTES

1. Both the title of this article and much of my experience of the practical implementation of its contents is indebted to my former colleague, the Rev Helen Hancock.

2. See particularly NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007) and *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003).

3. See particularly NT Wright, *Simply Christian* (London: SPCK, 2006) and *Virtue Reborn* (London: SPCK, 2010).

4. For a fuller account of the attempt to implement Wright's theology see my *Tom Wright For Everyone*.

becomes all about anticipating that very concrete future of resurrection within a new creation which we have been promised. The role of the Holy Spirit is to bring more of that promised future into the present with the role of Christians being to cooperate with this as our worship then including everything that anticipates that future.

At Christ Church this has considerably energised numerous areas of our church life through the theological (or eschatological) basis that it has provided for many of our activities. Just recently we changed the motto of our church school to 'Becoming the People that God made us to be' giving considerable clarity to the Christian ethos of the school through integrating within this vision all of the ways in which we want its children and staff to grow. Church services and social events are now understood as joyful celebrations which should be seeking to anticipate the new creation with sermons seeking to give practical encouragement on how to do this better in our daily lives.

a biblically based message of Christian hope holds the key to so many of our current problems

An example of this is the way in which sermon series going through books of the Bible have been increasingly accompanied by others seeking to provide biblical answers to questions such as 'What is so God-given' about 'sport', 'music' and 'sex'. This has then provided the basis for a positive exhortation to use such good gifts from God as well as possible rather than falling into either of the twin dangers of making them into destructive idols or the dualism of denying their essential goodness.

One of the perceived dangers with this approach is that it can be seen as downplaying the need to accept Jesus Christ as one's personal saviour and I suspect that this is the reason for the strong reluctance of some Christians to let go of 'going to heaven when you die' as 'the Christian hope'. As mentioned, they correctly sense that such an amendment will thereby change the agenda very considerably from getting people over that line to personal conversion and then simply looking to reinforce and defend that decision. Adopting a more biblical eschatology, however, completely safeguards the crucial nature of personal conversion whilst integrating it far more thoroughly to the calling to a converted lifestyle.

At Christ Church, the Alpha course is one of the principal means we continue to use to encourage personal conversion to Christ. But it is increasingly set within a much clearer understanding of the purpose of this conversion: i.e. being saved and renewed by God in order to live and work for him within a world that he has also pledged to save and renew. Through this, any sense of escapism is eliminated from people's perception of Christianity as they start understanding it as the risky, challenging and exciting calling to anticipate by how we live in the present as much as possible of that risen life within the new creation that God has promised to bring us.

The Endorsement of Holistic Mission

It is this which leads very directly to perhaps the most significant practical implication of this shift towards a more biblical eschatology which is in terms of the church's mission. One of the most exciting developments within recent years has been the accelerated growth of night shelters, food banks, debt counselling and lunch clubs run by local churches and seen as a crucial part of their mission. Where the understanding of Christian hope remains 'going to heaven when you die', however, such social mission will always remain vulnerable to the charge that it is simply 'rearranging deckchairs on the Titanic'. It will also lack much of the focus, direction and motivation which comes when such mission is understood (just as fully as working for personal conversions) as building for God's Kingdom through the Spirit's bringing of more of God's healing love and justice into the world ahead of that day when Jesus returns and this is made complete. Within Christ Church, the work of the two main areas of our social mission – a monthly lunch club called Grapevine and our participation in a winter night shelter – has been transformed through being understood against this context.

Numerous other areas of church life are similarly transformed when the transition is made to a more biblical eschatology. Space prohibits mention of the considerable clarity that a renewal of our understanding of the Christian hope also brings to issues such as the ministry of women, 'charismatic' issues such as healing, environmental issues, the nature and value of the sacraments, the indispensable role of the united church within God's plan of salvation and even the seemingly insoluble and complex issues surrounding homosexuality. If this is going to happen then so-called 'Bible-believing Christians' need to lead the way and repent of their sloppy and frankly agenda-driven neglect of the picture of Christian hope presented to us very clearly in the Bible. It holds the key to so many of our current problems and beyond that of equipping the church for its ministry and mission within a twenty-first century context. It is truly time for the Western Church to rediscover 'the importance of being eschatological'!