UNIT 3C: DOCTRINE

69: Eschatology and the Kingdom of God (Part 1)

1. Introduction: When is "Soon"?

The word *eschatology* means the study of the last things (from the Greek, *ta escha* meaning "last"). The word itself is a modern designation that was introduced by Biblical scholars in the middle of the nineteenth century "to attempt to cover a whole nexus of ideas that were prevalent in ancient theology, especially apocalyptic thought."[1] Eschatology can focus on different perspectives—last things, death, divine judgement, the end of time or the end of the world, linked to the apocalypse (from the Greek for "revelation, to uncover or disclose"). The foundational Biblical insight is from the opening verse of the last book of the Bible, Revelation, in which St John sets out "the Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants [i.e. all believers], the things which must soon take place" (Revelation 1:1).

The crucial word in that opening verse is "soon." In the early Church both the writers of the Gospel and most other books of the New Testament anticipated that the reign of God on earth was imminent with the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. For example, St Mark, writing in the 50s or early 60s, summed up that anticipated reign in the opening chapter of his Gospel: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel" (1:15). However, by the time of the writing of II Peter, probably between 65 and 68,[2] the absence of the *parousia* (that is, Christ's expected appearance at the end of time) was being

[1] John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 122-124; A. T. Hanson, "Eschatology" in Alan Richardson & John Bowden (Eds.), *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983), pp. 183-186.

[2] This date, shortly before Peter was martyred during the reign of Nero, is validated by excellent Biblical scholarship in the New American Standard Bible (NASB), which rejects the date of 120 AD (linked to an alternative author) suggested by Hanson (p.184). See *Zondervan NASB Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), p. 1820 [This translation is adopted from the *NIV (New International Version) Study Bible*, of 1995].

justified by the idea that "The Lord is not slow about his promises … but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). The book of Revelation, written by St John[3] either at the same time as II Peter, or possibly as late as 95, still closes with Christ's assertion that, "I am coming quickly" (Revelation 22:20); however, this book is firmly part of the literary genre of apocalyptic writings in which time is transcended.

2. The Kingdom of God: The Crux of Orthodox Christian Eschatology

The Roman Catholic Biblical scholar, Father Raymond E. Brown, is right to note that "New Testament Christian apocalyptic differs from Jewish apocalyptic of the same period in that the new era has already begun because of the coming of Christ."[4] However, the differences between the Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic writings are quite nuanced. On the Jewish side, there is despair "of seeing the Jewish hope for a reign of God on earth being manifested in this world"; and instead "they look for a realm of a transcendent kind which could only be established as a result of a divine irruption into the present order to overthrow it and its evils."[5] On the Christian side, the apocalyptic still has its roots in Old Testament prophecy, in which both the prophet and the reader are "brought into the heavenly court that meets in God's presence and are introduced to the mysterious plan of God" (Amos 3:7; 1 Kings 22:19-23; Isaiah 6);[6] but in the book of Revelation it is Christ himself who is "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (Revelation 19:16), reigning from the "great white throne" (Revelation 20:11) and proclaiming, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

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[3] The NASB rejects Dionysius's view that Revelation was written by a certain John the Presbyter, because "the external evidence seems overwhelmingly supportive of the traditional view." p. 1846.
[4] Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 775.
[5] Christopher Rowland, "Apocalyptic", in Richardson & Bowden, *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, p. 29.
[6] Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 775.

While the Jews of the first two centuries were confronted with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70, the collapse of the Simon Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 and their incorrect perception that the true Messiah had not come, the early Christians faced a similarly devastating experience—their awareness that Christ had not returned as quickly as expected. Initially, the first Christians strongly embraced the idea that "the kingly rule of God is certainly present in the person of the King-Messiah," but they also believed that God's reign would "be fully manifested only at the end of time."[7] This tension between the present and future aspects of the Kingdom of God "has been reflected in almost every period of Christian history."[8] On the one hand, "the news of the nearness of the Kingdom becomes a leitmotif of Christ's preaching", challenging his listeners (in both the early Church and throughout history) to change their lives; and yet Christ also tells his disciples (and us) that the Kingdom will only "come to fulfilment in the *eschaton*, at his second coming (cf. Luke 22:29-30)."[9]

This tension between the present and future aspects of the Kingdom of God is both paradoxical and central to Orthodox Christian faith. As Father Alexander Schmemann has reflected:

> [A]s Christians we already possess that in which we believe. The Kingdom is still to come, and yet the Kingdom that is to come is already in the midst of us. The Kingdom is not only something promised, it is something of which we can taste here and now.… [We] live in time by that which

[7] Eric J. Sharpe, "Kingdom of God", in Richardson & Bowden, p. 317-318.
[8] Sharpe, p. 317.
[9] Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, "Eschatology", in Mary B. Cunningham & Elizabeth Theokritoff (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 108.
[10] "Liturgy and eschatology", S*obornost* 7.1 (1985), pp. 243-245; quoted by Alfeyev, p. 108.

> is beyond time; living by that which is not yet come, but which we already know and possess.[10]

Thus the very idea of the Kingdom of God, which is lived out in the present but is still to come in the future is the essence of Orthodox Christian eschatology. The resolution is that there has not yet been a resolution.

3. Protestant Confusions about Eschatology

Bishop Hilarion (Alfeyev) rightly views eschatology as "fundamental to the [contemporary Orthodox] Church."[11] Yet he presents an understanding of eschatology that is very different from that of many evangelical and liberal Protestants, who sometimes promulgate a misunderstanding of eschatology that has perhaps seeped to some extent into modern Orthodoxy here and there. In a proper Orthodox understanding of eschatology:

> … we must note that eschatology is an area of questions, and not answers; of mysteries, and not of the obvious; of hopes, not of definitive final affirmations. Much of what concerns the future fate of the world and humankind has been revealed to us in Holy Scripture and the Tradition of the Church, but much still remains in the hidden depths of God's mysteries.[12]

This apophatic understanding of eschatology is appropriate, necessary even, especially in the context of rejecting much evangelical and pietistic hype about both the Kingdom of God and the end of the world.

Both Martin Luther and John Calvin believed that the Roman Catholic Church saw itself as implementing the Kingdom of God on earth; and they firmly rejected the idea that the Kingdom should "be identified either with the visible church itself, or

[11] p. 107.
[12] p. 109.

the rule of Christ over the individual believer."[13] Both Pietists and Evangelicals came to believe that by being evangelistic individual Christians could "work toward the coming of the kingdom" by bringing people to be "new citizens[s] of 'the kingdom of Christ'. Once the idea was rejected that the Kingdom of God was "wholly in God's hands as a gift of grace" it became possible for Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) to insist that the kingdom was linked to "ideal human relations on earth", which "opened the way for a secularisation of the kingdom idea in terms of notions of progress, development, evolution and material prosperity". A form of Biblical interpretation known as Dispensationalism, which originated with John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) and the Plymouth Brethren, divided human life on earth into seven dispensations, leading to further confusions, especially around the meaning of the binding of Satan for 1,000 years.[14]

Another significant element in Protestant eschatological thinking was the publication and subsequent controversy about the validity of Albert Schweitzer's *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* (1901, translated into English, 1914) and *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906, translated into English, 1910). Schweitzer offered twentieth century Christians a false choice—either accept that the historical Jesus expected and proclaimed the end of the world or "relapse into almost total scepticism about the life and significance of Jesus".[15] Schweitzer's theology was

[13] Sharpe, p. 317 for all quotations in this paragraph.
[14] See Revelation 20:4; J. C. O'Neil, "Dispensationalism" in Richardson & Bowden, p. 158; and the *Scofield New King James Study Bible* (Carlisle: STL, 1902/1989). Cf. Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition* (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2005), pp. 341-344, esp. 344n. A magisterial comparative survey of heterodox Protestant eschatologies may be found in T. L. Frazier, *A Second Look at the Second Coming: Sorting Through the Speculations* (Chesterton, IN: Conciliar Press, 1999).
[15] Hanson, pp.184-185. For further background material see: http//:en/wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert Schweitzer, with its article on Albert Schweitzer which notes that N.T. Wright has written a "comprehensive demolition" of Schweitzer's position in *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: SPCK, 1996). A more balanced assessment of Schweitzer's theology and life is given in F. L. Cross & E. A. Livingstone's *Dictionary of the Christian* Church (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), p.1469-1470.

extensively challenged in the 1930s by C.H. Dodd's "realized eschatology" based upon "the belief that Jesus' references to the kingdom of God meant a present reality rather than a future apocalypse;"[16] however, scepticism about the historical validity of the Synoptic Gospels, as well as the notion that the kingdom of God is simply an ideal human society both retain strong support among many Protestant scholars and faithful.[17]

4. Orthodox Eschatology: Balancing Universal-Historical and Personal Dimensions

There are two dimensions to eschatology in Christian theology—one is personal and the other, universal-historical. Personal eschatology is concerned not only with death and the person's fate after death, but also with the awareness that the Kingdom of God is an experience that is "accessible" to human beings in their earthly lives.[18] Although the distinction is helpful, the different perspectives—universal/historical and personal—are intertwined and integrated.

As Orthodox Christians we recognise that eschatology is fundamental to the Church precisely because the Resurrection and the Ascension have taken place.[19] Bishop Hilarion boldly but rightly states that "without the eschatological dimension, Christianity loses its meaning."[20] For example, the Divine Liturgy is not simply a remembrance of past events (the last supper, the suffering, death and resurrection

[16] See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C._H._Dodd .
[17] Hanson, pp. 184-186; Sharpe, p.318). In the light of these earlier confusions, it is perhaps not surprising that 16 action-packed novels about end times by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins—the *Left Behind* series—have sold 65 million copies, largely in the United States (see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left_Behind_(series)_).
[18] Bishop Hilarion has drawn this division between the personal and the universal/historical interpretations of eschatology from N.A. Berdyaev, "Eschatological metaphysics", in Berdyaev's *The Kingdom of the Spirit and the Kingdom of Caesar* [in Russian] (Moscow: Respublika, 1995), p. 277. However, Berdyaev's personal dimension is concerned solely with "questions concerning death and the fate of the person after death," whereas this lecture follows Bishop Hilarion in stressing that: "The eschatological 'last times' begin with the first coming of Christ and his preaching on earth" (p. 108).
[19] See Bishop Hilarion, p. 107.
[20] p. 107.

of the Saviour) as it is for Protestants, but rather "a participation in the future reality" of Christ's reign "when time is transformed into eternity."[21]

In *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition*, Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky considers Christian eschatology from seven Biblically supported perspectives:

(1) the particular judgment about the fate of human beings after death until the General Judgment; (2) the signs of the nearness of the Day of the Second Coming of the Lord and the Last Judgment; (3) The Second Coming of the Son of Man (i.e. Christ); (4) The resurrection of the dead; (5) the end of the world; (6) the universal judgment; and (7) the Kingdom of Glory.[22]

His comprehensive analysis is somewhat daunting, but an attractive antidote to *The Left Behind* series, especially when Father Michael's analysis is linked to the eschatological insights of the seventh century monk, St Isaac of Nineveh, also known as St Isaac the Syrian.

First, the particular judgment refers to what happens to people from when they die until the Last Judgment at the Second Coming of Christ.

When a human being dies the soul is separated from the body; and it is the soul that is immortal. Strikingly, Father Michael points out that "the state of the soul after death, according to the clear testimony of the word of God, is not unconscious, but conscious"; and he cites the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, with the rich man's plea on behalf of his five brothers to Abraham (Luke 16:19-31), as well as the reference in Hebrews 9:27 to the fact that "it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment."[23] This particular judgment follows after the death of a

[21] pp. 109, 119.
[22] *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition* (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2005), pp. 332-354.
[23] p. 333.

person, but it is not clear precisely how such a judgment occurs.[24] Angels are involved, protecting the person who has just died from "the dark powers (that) seek to devour those who are weak spiritually"; and there is "a special need" for the soul whose body has just died to be "supported by prayer on the part of the living members of the Church."[25]

The Orthodox Church does not recognize the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that after death each soul goes to purgatory where it is cleansed before going to heaven, but this teaching about the particular judgment has some similarities. The *Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs on the Orthodox Faith*, based on *The Confession of the Orthodox Faith* compiled by the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Dosistheus, and approved at the Council of Jerusalem in 1672, reads:

> We believe that the souls of the dead are in a state of blessedness or torment according to their deeds. After being separated from the body, they immediately pass over either into joy or into sorrow and grief; however, they do not feel either complete blessedness or complete torment. For complete blessedness or complete torment each one receives after the General Resurrection, when the soul is reunited with the body in which it lived in virtue or in vice.[26]

In Orthodox doctrine, there is some sense that judgment after death is a process that is not completed until the Second Coming of Christ, but what happens to the soul immediately after death is not clear.

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[24] Father Michael lays considerable emphasis on the importance of "toll houses" in which individual souls are confronted and taxed for their sins on earth, but as there is no Biblical foundation for this view and limited, controversial witness in Tradition, this approach has not been set out in this lecture.. See pp. 334-335 in Pomazansky or the full text on-line of St John Maximovitch's *Life after Death: A Description of the First Forty Days after Death* at: http://www.orthodox.net/articles/life-after-death-john-maximovitch.html.
For a robust refutation of the toll houses teaching see Fr Dr Michael Azkoul at: https://thoughtsintrusive.wordpress.com/2015/06/16/the-return-of-the-tollhouses/

[25] Pomazansky, p. 334.
[26] Par. 18; cited by Pomazansky, pp. 335,345.

In *Life after Death: A Description of the First 40 Days after Death*, St John Maximovitch of Shanghai and San Francisco (1896-1966) offers the following sensible spiritual advice:

> Every one of us who desires to manifest his love for the dead and give them real help, can do this best of all through prayer for them, and particularly by commemorating them at the [Divine] Liturgy, when the particles which are cut out for the living and for the dead are let fall into the Blood of the Lord with the words, 'Wash away, O Lord, the sins of those here commemorated by Thy Precious Blood and by the prayers of Thy saints.'
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> We can do nothing better or greater for the dead than to pray for them, offering commemoration for them at the Liturgy. Of this they are always in need, and especially during those forty days when the soul of the deceased is proceeding on its path to the eternal blessedness. The body feels nothing then: it does not see its close ones who have assembled, does not smell the fragrance of the flowers, does not hear the funeral orations. But the soul senses the prayers offered for it and is grateful to those who make them and is spiritually close to them. [27]

Whatever happens to the soul at the particular judgment, prayer by those who are living for those who have just died is certainly appropriate.

Second, it is not for us who are living to know the precise timing of the Second Coming (Acts 1:7); and if we remember this advice, much human confusion will be averted. Nevertheless, there are numerous signs given in the Bible of the nearness of the Second Coming and the Last Judgment, especially in the 24th Chapter of St Matthew, as well as in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-11, Daniel 7-11 and Revelation 11-13.[28] It is appropriate then that we should "keep on the alert" precisely because we "do

[27] See: www.orthodox.net/articles/life-after-death-john-maximovitch.html .
[28] See Pomazansky, pp. 335-337.

not know when the appointed time will come" (Mark 13:33), or as St Isaac the Syrian phrases such an attitude, quoting the 4th century St Ephrem:

> We should make our soul like a ready ship that does not know when a favourable wind will blow, or like a tenant who does not know when the landlord will give the order to depart…. [We should] make ourselves ready, and prepare ourselves in advance, before the coming of that decisive day, that bridge and door into the new age.[29]

The true "new age" is what confronts us after death in the light of the resurrection of Christ, not as many suppose, occult, mystical, astrological or otherwise fantastical manifestations. These contemporary obsessions are demonic counterfeits of the kingdom of God and have led many astray.

The theme of keeping alert for the Second Coming is not simply an embarrassed cover-up for the failure of Jesus Christ to return quickly, as Hanson maintains.[30] There is a firm monastic tradition of "meditation on the future world" in which, in the words of St Isaac the Syrian, one offers prayer "with humble compunction" in an attempt to carry within the soul "the continuous memory of God."[31] Bishop Hilarion suggests that:

> The transitory character of human nature, according to Isaac, is the first thought which descends from God into a human person and creates in him [or her] a good foundation for the way leading to profound contemplation.[32]

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[29] Cited by Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), p. 270.
[30] See Hansen, p. 184.
[31] Cited by Hilarion Alfeyev, *Isaac the Syrian*, p. 271.
[32] p. 270. Bishop Hilarion paraphrases St Isaac: "Every evening, before sleeping, one should remind oneself of death, imagining that this night may be his [or her] last." St Isaac's actual prayer is challenging: "When you approach to your bed, say to it: 'This very night, perchance, you will be my tomb, O bed; for I know not whether tonight instead of a transient sleep, the eternal sleep of death will be mine'"(pp. 270-271).

In St Isaac's view the "concern over God's judgment" is "a continual quest after his rest", linked to an awareness that because of our human nature we will "always remain imperfect."[33]

It is because of our imperfections and "bodily cares" that "eschatological meditation on the things of the future age is a source of spiritual rebirth and renewal."[34] St Isaac summarises his reasons for reflecting on the nearness of the Second Coming and the Last Judgment with a rather profound direct appeal to each of us to grow in our Orthodox faith and life:

> The beginning of the renewal of the inner person consists, then, in meditation and constant reflection on the things to come. By this means the person is little by little purified of customary distraction on earthly things; he [or she] becomes like a snake which has sloughed off its old skin, and is renewed and rejuvenated. Similarly, inasmuch as bodily thoughts, and concern for these [bodily thoughts], diminish in the mind, accordingly reflection on things heavenly, and the gazing on things to come, increasingly springs up in the soul. Delight in the ministry of these things overcomes and proves stronger than the pleasures of the bodily thoughts.[35]

This is a "renewal of the inner person" with a rather different focus than the contemporary "renewal" or the suggestion that closeness to Christ leads to material prosperity. In losing our "old skin" of focusing "on earthly things", an Orthodox eschatological perspective becomes an attitude to be welcomed, rather than feared, as we shall see next week in our continuing study on the relationship between eschatology and the kingdom of God.

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[33] p. 271.
[34] Hilarion Alfeyev, *Isaac the Syrian*, p. 273.
[35] Hilarion Alfeyev, *Isaac the Syrian* p. 274.