

A First Century Rapture Error

*Looking for the blessed hope and
glorious appearing of our great
God and Savior Jesus Christ.*

~Titus 2:13
NKJV

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Thesis

It was possible for erroneous ideas about the rapture and other doctrines to creep into the church very early in church history, even during the lifetime of the Apostles. In John 21 we find an example of this.

Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism has claimed, and rightly so, that errors concerning what the Bible teaches about the coming of Christ crept into the church early in its history, and the truth had to be recovered and re-discovered at a later time.

Key Passage—John 21:21-23

21) Peter, seeing him (the beloved disciple John), saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do?

22) Jesus saith unto him, If I will (desire) that he tarry (remain on earth) till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me.

23) Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die. Yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, If I will (desire) that he tarry (remain on earth) till I come, what is that to thee?

Background

In verses 18-19 the Lord Jesus told Peter about his death which would take place when Peter is “old.” Peter then sees John (verses 20-21) and asks the Lord what will happen to him.

The Saying that Went Abroad

It was being said by a number of the disciples that John would not die (would not see physical death), but would remain alive unto the coming of the Lord Jesus. See verse 23.

Observations

- 1) This saying involved erroneous doctrine. What they were saying and teaching about John and the Lord's coming was not accurate, and, indeed, has turned out to be absolutely false.
- 2) This erroneous doctrine was spread abroad and propagated. It had become a common saying among the brethren.
- 3) This erroneous doctrine concerned the coming of the Lord Jesus (the rapture).
- 4) This erroneous doctrine was based on what Jesus said but it was not actually what Jesus said. His exact words were misunderstood and misinterpreted.
- 5) What they said was close to the truth but it was not the truth. Remember, error always rides close to the truth.

The Error

What error did these brethren teach? It was this: John would not die and would not see physical death because the Lord would come first. Note: It's interesting that John himself corrected this error, even though it would have been to his advantage if what they were saying had been true (he would not have died!). It's also interesting that their error was not far from the truth because 1) what they were saying could have happened (Christ could have come before John died); 2) it is a glorious fact of Scripture that there will be a whole generation of believers that will not see physical death because Christ will come for them first (1 Cor. 15:51-52). But even though it was close to the truth, it did not accurately and exactly represent what Jesus had said.

The Truth

What did the Lord Jesus actually say? What was the exact meaning of His words? It was this: John MIGHT NOT die. Jesus said, "If." The rapture may or may not have come in John's lifetime, and now, from our perspective, we know that it did not come in John's lifetime. In saying what He said our Lord presented the doctrine of imminency (He might come even in John's lifetime), but He did not give any grounds for setting dates (He did not say that He had to come by a certain time or before a certain event). He did not teach that He would come before John died, but only that He might come.

Note: This is different from the inspired message that was communicated to Simeon (Luke 2:26) who was told that he would not see death until he saw the Lord's Christ (the Lord's first coming). In the days of Simeon, if the believers had said, "Simeon will not die until Christ comes," then they would have been correct.

Application for Us

In interpreting prophecy it's important to pay attention to the exact words of Christ and the exact words of Scripture. If we stray from "Thus Saith the Lord" then we can easily fall prey to erroneous views or foolish and ungrounded speculation. The error which these early disciples embraced was minor compared to the serious errors that were to come later ("The church has replaced Israel in God's program" "There will be no future earthly kingdom" etc.).

A Lesson in Church History

If these early disciples could have erred with respect to the Lord's coming, then it is not difficult to see how the early church fathers could have embraced erroneous ideas about certain doctrines even very early in the history of the church. Thus we should not be surprised to find such errors as baptismal regeneration and the growing authority of a single bishop in certain cities, etc. Such errors developed not long after the time of the apostles. What the church fathers taught is always of interest but it must never be used to establish a doctrine. The key question must ever be, "What saith the Scriptures?" (Romans 4:3).