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“You Are Here: The Map of Redemptive History”

Although I am blessed with a good internal compass, my first stop at a shopping mall is usually the mall directory. One of the most important features of that directory is the brightly colored arrow which indicates “you are here.” Knowing where you are is the first step toward figuring out where you need to go.

When it comes to shopping, the mall directory is a nice convenience. When it comes to understanding the Bible, finding the “you are here” arrow is absolutely essential. Figuring out where we are in terms of our relationship to the course of redemptive history not only answers many of the questions we may have about the Bible, such knowledge often determines what questions we are even going to ask.

The practical ramifications of finding the “you are here” arrow are immediately apparent. Since we live in the “post”-apostolic age—some two thousand years removed from the time of the apostles—how do we relate to the apostolic age so long ago? Should we do as many Pentecostals do, and understand the dramatic events found in the Book of Acts as normative for what should go on in the church today? Or should we see ourselves as living in a different age entirely, one that has little or no connection to the time of the apostles?

We can push this matter even further. How do we as Christians living in the post-apostolic age relate to the Old Covenant era which preceded the time of the apostles? Can we look to the history of ancient Israel to help us understand how we are to relate to non-Christians around us? Should we look to the monarchy in Israel for guidance as to how the nations of the earth should govern themselves in the modern world?

These questions find their answer in knowing where we are in terms of the progress of history after the close of the Canon of Scripture with the composition of the Book of Revelation, written in the early-mid nineties of the first century. For those of us who live nearly two thousand years after “Bible times,” where do we place the “you are here” arrow? In order to place that arrow properly, we need to have a good understanding of what has gone before, especially since those living during the apostolic era (i.e., Jesus and the apostles) told us what to expect after the close of the apostolic age.

The last two thousand years of church history serve as a testimony to the fulfillment of this commission as Jesus’ authority over all things has been made manifest in the continual existence of a church (a community of believers centered around the preached word and the administration of the sacraments) and through the spread of the gospel and to the ends of the earth. The very existence of the church in the midst of an unbelieving world reminds us that God chooses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise (1 Corinthians 1:27). Despite remaining foolishness to the Greek as well as a stumbling block to the Jew (1 Corinthians 1:23), the preaching of the gospel—the message of Christ crucified (Galatians 3:1)—continues to be the means by which God advances his kingdom.

In this essay, I will concentrate upon the nature of the course of the post-apostolic history of the church as defined in the New Testament itself, as well as considering several of the signposts given us by those same New Testament writers which serve as indicators of what to expect as post-apostolic history

continues to unfold until the end of the age.

When describing the first three centuries of the church's existence, in his famous *Church History* Eusebius describes how Christians in certain parts of the Roman world thrived, while others living in different locales faced horrific persecution. The same thing holds true across the ages. Circumstances may be dire in one time and in one place, while great progress and revival can be found in others. Regions dominated by paganism are evangelized, while places known for a strong gospel witness become secularized again. This is the nature of life in the post-apostolic age.

The alternating cycle of progress/persecution we see throughout the history of Christ's church mirrors the cyclical patterns associated with the seal, bowl and trumpet judgments found in the Book of Revelation. These divine judgments unfold throughout the course of history, but the Apostle John indicates that immediately before the end (the return of Christ), the cyclical nature of these judgments greatly intensifies, and world conditions will get much worse immediately before the time of the end. The good news of the Apocalypse is that the downward spiral of rebellion against God which is tied to the persecution of his people, will be dramatically interrupted by the return of Jesus Christ just when all seems lost. If the Book of Revelation tells us anything, it is that Jesus Christ conquers in the end. What the "you are here" arrow cannot tell us is how much time remains before the return of Jesus Christ.

This alternating cycle of progress/persecution seen throughout the history of the church fits with several important statements in the New Testament which indicate that a Christian possesses a dual citizenship—one earthly (Romans 13:1-7) and one heavenly (Philippians 3:20). We also read that during the post-apostolic period, God's people must live with a marked eschatological tension between "the already" and the "not yet." Life in this age is to be lived in the light of the certainty that we will reach our destination because God has promised that this will be the case. We know this to be true because Jesus died for our sins and was raised for our justification.

In the so-called prison letters (Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians), Paul speaks of a believer's heavenly citizenship (Philippians 3:20) based on the believer's assurance that Jesus' bodily resurrection guarantees our own resurrection at the end of the age (Philippians 3:21). Paul also tells us to seek the things above where Christ is (Colossians 3:1-3) because this gives us a heavenly perspective on earthly things. Paul reminds us that all those who trust in Christ are seen as though they were already raised with Christ and seated with him in the heavenlies (Ephesians 2:4-7). For Paul, Christ's death and resurrection (the critical historical events of the apostolic era) ensures our own salvation and grants us a heavenly perspective on earthly things. Even though the "you are here" arrow is placed in our own day and age some two thousand years after the apostolic age, the placement of the arrow itself must be seen as the guarantee that the same Savior who was crucified, died and buried, will also ensure that we reach our final goal—the redemption of our bodies and life eternal.

This future hope based upon certain historical events reflects another major theme running throughout the New Testament—namely that what God has done in Jesus Christ (the already) ensures that everything God has promised his people will come to pass (the not yet). Paul speaks this way in Romans 8, when he speaks of understanding our present sufferings in the light of that glory yet to be revealed when Christ returns at the end of the age (Romans 8:23-25). Because we trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who not only grants us hope (based upon what God has already done for us through the doing and dying of Jesus), but the Spirit's indwelling is itself the guarantee of the redemption of our bodies (Ephesians 1:13-14).

This “already/not yet” perspective on things reminds us that we are pilgrims making our journey to the heavenly city. Although God has ordained all things in this life—giving everything we do meaning and purpose—the journey is not complete until we reach our final destination. Like the ancient Israelites who wandered through the wilderness of the Sinai desert awaiting entrance into the promised land of Canaan, we too look forward to our entrance into that heavenly city of which the earthly Canaan was but a dim shadow. Material blessings are not an end in themselves, but point to heavenly blessings far greater than our minds can conceive. This is what the author of Hebrews was getting at when he commended Abraham for looking beyond the land of the promise to what lies ahead at the end of the age (Hebrews 11:9-10).

When we see God’s record of faithfulness in the past, we are able to look to the future knowing that God keeps his promises. Knowing how things will turn out in the end gives us the “big picture” perspective we need to make sense of a life lived between the time of Christ’s first advent and his second. The “we are here” arrow only makes sense when placed on a map of the whole shopping mall. An arrow on a blank sheet of plastic does me no good. The same holds true for seeing our current place in redemptive history in the light of all that God has done before we came along, knowing that Christ’s finished work is the guarantee of reaching our final destiny. The arrow only makes sense against the big-picture backdrop of redemptive history.

Not only do we have a sure and certain hope because what has been accomplished in the apostolic era by Jesus Christ is the guarantee of the resurrection at the end of the age, the New Testament itself speaks of certain “signs of the end,” which give us additional insight into what to expect as the course of post-apostolic history unfolds. Not only are we given a theology of the future (i.e., Christ’s death and resurrection guarantees predicted future events will come to pass), but we are also given several signs of the end, which serve to give us a biblical “head’s up” as to when the end is drawing near.

There are three categories of “signs” of the end in the New Testament. The first category of signs includes those which are specific to the apostolic era. The second group deals with those signs which characterize the entire inter-advental age (the time between Christ’s first and second coming). The third group of signs are those which specifically serve to herald the end of the age.

As for those signs which are specific to the apostolic age—those signs to be witnessed by the disciples in their lifetimes (i.e., “this generation,” Matthew 24:23), there are four specific events foretold by Jesus. There will be false prophets along with the arrest and persecution of the disciples (Matthew 24:9-14; Mark 13:9-13; Luke 21:12-19). Jesus also predicts the Roman siege of Jerusalem as the so-called “times of the Gentiles” begins (Luke 19:41-44; 21:24). Our Lord also speaks of the destruction of the city and the temple in A.D. 70 (Matthew 24:1-2; 14-22; Mark 13:1-2; 14-20; Luke 24:56; 20-24). Finally, Jesus speaks of the desolation and diaspora of Israel (Matthew 23:37-38), which came to pass with the complex of events associated with the Jewish Wars. These signs have been fulfilled with an amazing accuracy.

Then there are a series of signs which characterize the entire inter-advental period—birth pains of the age to come. Jesus warns of false Christs (Matthew 24:3-8; Mark 13:3-8; Luke 21:7-11), wars and rumors of wars (Matthew 24:3-8; Mark 13:3-8; Luke 21:7-11), earthquakes and famine (Matthew 24:3-8; Mark 13:3-8; Luke 21:7-11), false teachers and false doctrine (2 Timothy 3:1-5), as well as the persecution of believers (2 Timothy 3:12-17). These things are not only present during the lifetimes of the apostles, these things may be said to characterize the entire post-apostolic era. Given the presence of such things until our Lord returns, Jesus compared the inter-advental age to the days of Noah (Matthew 24:37-38). God has announced that judgment is at hand, yet unbelievers go on with their immorality as though

nothing important was about to happen.

Finally, the New Testament speaks of certain signs which particularly serve to herald the end of the age and the return of our Lord. The first such sign is that the gospel must be preached to the ends of the earth (Matthew 24:14). Although we cannot definitively declare that this sign has already been fulfilled, we can say that the last two thousand years of church history are testimony to the fact that the gospel has been preached widely. But whether it has been fulfilled or not, it is clearly the mission of the church to strive to obey the Great Commission and take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

The second sign which foretells of the end is the salvation of “all Israel” as recounted by Paul in Romans 11:25-26. In this section of Romans, Paul speaks directly to the future course of redemptive history, specifically the role to be played by Jew and Gentile in the post-apostolic age. Remarkably, Paul connects the future salvation of “all Israel” to the resurrection at the end of the age (Romans 11:15). This serves to connect the conversion of Israel to the time of the end. Although Christians disagree about the identity of “all Israel” (some believe this to be the full number of the elect, some believe this group is the sum total of the believing remnant of Jews, others see Paul’s reference being to Jews living at the time of the end) it is clear that “all Israel” is saved after the fullness of the Gentiles has run its course.

I take Paul to be speaking of the dramatic conversion of large numbers of ethnic Jews immediately before the time of the end as gospel progress rebounds from a largely Gentile mission to a Jewish one. I understand “all Israel” to be a reference to those ethnic Jews who embrace Jesus as their Messiah because God once again has mercy upon his ancient people. These folk become members of Christ’s church as a testimony to the grace of God. This mass conversion of “all Israel” tells us the end is at hand.

I also see Paul’s discussion of the future as an indication that the nation of Israel has fulfilled its purpose in preparing us for the coming of Christ (Galatians 3:23-29; 4:4-6; Romans 10:4). Therefore, because we know that the “we are here” arrow points to a time after Jesus has fulfilled all righteousness, it should be clear that we cannot look to ancient Israel for help in determining how modern nations should be governed (Christ fulfilled the law in its civil and ceremonial senses). Nor can we look to the holy wars of Israel as a pattern for our own day, since those wars pointed ahead to God’s judgment on the earth at the time of Christ’s second advent. Israel’s role on the center stage of redemptive history has given way to the role played by the true Israel, Jesus Christ, in whom all the promises of God are “yes” and “amen” (2 Corinthians 1:20).

The land promise God made to Abraham (i.e. Genesis 15:18-21), has already been fulfilled—at least that is what Joshua reports (Joshua 23:14). It is Paul who universalizes the original land of promise far beyond the narrow confines from the River of Egypt and the Euphrates to include the whole world (Romans 4:13). Although Israel’s national role in redemptive history has run its course with the coming of Jesus, when we see large number of Jews becoming Christians, we know that the end is rapidly drawing near. The presence of a modern nation-state of Israel in the ancient land of promise is certainly tied to God’s mysterious purposes for the Jews because all of the promises God made to the true children of Abraham (those Jews and Gentiles alike) who believe the promise and receive the Holy Spirit have come to pass because Christ has come and the gospel has been preached to the Gentile nations.

The third sign of the impending dawn of the end of the age is a great apostasy, which is closely connected to the appearance of the Man of Sin (i.e., “the Antichrist”), who is the final eschatological enemy of the church (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, Revelation 20:7-10). Although Christians have often been

tempted to see any moral decline in their own age as a sign of the end, the final apostasy will surpass anything witnessed to date. Even though there have been many “wannabe” antichrists since the apostolic era, and many of the signs associated with the antichrist have been present to some degree throughout the post-apostolic period, at some point in the future, God will cease his restraint of the mystery of lawlessness (2 Thessalonians 2:7), when Satan is released from the abyss (Revelation 20:7-10). Only then will the final antichrist appear, soon to be crushed by Jesus at his return.

When this final apostasy occurs and the final antichrist is revealed, God’s people will face horrific persecution from a reinvigorated beast (the state) and its leader (the antichrist) who insist that the people of God declare “Caesar is Lord.” This is the one thing Christians will refuse to do, while at the same time refusal to do so is that which provokes the beast to its great fury against the people of God. Thankfully, the reign of this arch-enemy of Christ and his people will be short, as he is revealed only to go to his destruction (2 Thessalonians 2:8; Revelation 20:7-10).

Given the nature of these signs which herald the end of the age, and the great delay in seeing them realized, what is the relationship between these signs of the end, and the ability of believers to discern the times? What do we do with those scriptural statements regarding the imminence of Christ’s return, in light of those passages which speak of a delay regarding Christ’s second coming (i.e., Matthew 25:1-13)? We are told that specific signs clearly precede the end (Matthew 24:32), yet we are also told that the Lord can return at any moment (Matthew 24:37). No doubt, the tension between signs preceding the end and the suddenness of the Lord’s eventual return is intentional. For one thing, this tension prevents date-setting since no man knows the date or the hour of the Lord’s return (Matthew 24:36). For another, this tension also prevents idleness on the part of God’s people. Since we do not know when the Lord will return, we must watch and wait, just as Jesus instructed us to do (Matthew 24:42-44).

Although Jesus’ words about no one knowing the date of his return are crystal clear, this has not stopped various prophecy prognosticators from setting dates and unduly speculating about the time of the end despite being forbidden from doing so. Yet, we would be foolish to allow such speculative musings to turn us off to the point that we avoid altogether identifying the signs of the end and eagerly awaiting the Lord’s return. Not only did the apostolic church declare this hope in the benediction *Maranatha*, (“Come quickly Lord Jesus”), we should look forward with great expectation to the blessed hope, the glorious appearance of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13).

Although there are signs which remain to be fulfilled (i.e., the conversion of the Jews and the appearance of a final antichrist), these things can begin to come to pass at any moment. No doubt, this is what Jesus was speaking of when he described the time of the end as like the pain of birth. Anyone who has been in the delivery room knows that while things start slowly and regularly, soon the conflation of contractions and moments of rest take on a life of their own. One never knows when the final contraction will come, only that the presence of them means a baby is about to be born.

In this regard, Geerhardus Vos is certainly correct—the best interpreter of some of these events is their fulfillment! Given the prior course of church history and the countless misguided attempts to identify the Antichrist and predict the timing of our Lord’s return, let us simply reaffirm that this ought not be done and expect that because God’s people have the eyes of faith, we will know that the end is at hand when we see these things come to pass.

What, then, exactly does the Bible predict for the future course of this age? The events associated with the founding of the church and the persecution of the apostles and earliest Christians have clearly been

fulfilled. The destruction of Jerusalem, the temple and the diaspora in A.D. 70 was fulfilled and the spread of Christianity to the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 1:8; Matthew 13:31-32) was already underway at the close of the apostolic era.

Those signs which will characterize the course of the interadvental period are also ongoing, just as Jesus predicted. There are wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and other natural disasters, false teachers, heresy and persecution. This means that the Bible lays out a general pattern of birth pains which occur throughout the entire inter-advental period. But the Bible does not predict specific wars, earthquakes, etc. The Bible may explain current events in this sense, but current events cannot be used to interpret Scripture.

The spread of the gospel into the ends of the earth (as a condition of the end), and the salvation of all of God's elect are on-going, although the exact fulfillment of this condition is unknown. Furthermore, the conversion of Israel as the fullness of the Gentiles comes in—a harbinger of the end—is also on-going, but not yet fulfilled. A great apostasy within the church and the appearance of the Man of Sin (the Antichrist), which is tied to the release of Satan from the abyss where he had been bound so as to prevent him from deceiving the nations (Revelation 20:1-10)—is apparently not yet fulfilled.

The placement of the “you are here” arrow at our present point in history tells us three things. The first is that we have before us a two thousand year record of the presence of Christ's church in the midst of a fallen world and the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth. Although the apostolic era has long since passed—and as the apostles left the scene, so did the miracles which confirmed their divine office—Jesus Christ is still present with us through his word and sacraments in the power of the Holy Spirit. The knowledge of this should give us hope that everything God has promised will come to pass.

The second thing is that the apostles spoke to us about what to expect, and that the future course of history would unfold for some time as part of God's purpose for his people. The very presence of the “you are here” arrow means that God has not forgotten us, and by looking back to observe his faithfulness to his people, we can look ahead with hope. Christ's empty tomb points to the great day of resurrection yet to come.

Finally, the presence of the “you are here” arrow means that all is not yet fulfilled. There are signs yet to be fulfilled, but when they come to pass, despite the darkness of the days and the urgency of our situation, we can look up, knowing that our redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:28)!

But until the Lord comes again, let us claim that glorious promise—“Marantha! Come quickly, Lord Jesus.”