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61:4

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Critical Mass

Part 24: Eschatology and Church Growth

by Gary North

And he [God] brought him [Abram] forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness (Gen. 15:5-6).

Abram had worried that he would die without biological heirs. God told him that this fear was no longer warranted, that stupendous growth for the sons of Abram lay ahead, God even changed Abram's name to Abraham: father of nations. Abraham believed God.

Modern Christians do not concern themselves greatly with questions of multi-generation inheritance. This is because they do not concern themselves with the multi-generation future. Had Abram expected the imminent Rapture or the imminent parousia of Christ (end of time), he would have concerned himself with local evangelism, not inheritance. But Abraham did not believe in the imminent Rapture or the parousia. Instead, he believed God. "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:8-10).

Abraham was committed to long-term multiplication and visible cultural dominion by his heirs. He was willing to go wherever God sent him. He had no doubts regarding the arrival and survival of his heirs, even to the point of taking Isaac up the mountain to sacrifice him. That was serious belief in the earthly future, which God rewarded.

This optimism is not shared by premillennial fundamentalism, nor is it shared by amillennial Calvinism or Lutheranism. From the looks of Roman Catholicism today, it is not shared there. As for Eastern Orthodoxy, future-orientation has never been part of its mystical, time-escaping theology. The multi-generation growth mentality is absent in modern Christianity.

A Great Cultural Victory Lies Ahead

Abraham knew that certain things would have to happen in the future before the end of time. Abraham did not live in the expectation of the end of time. God's promise was clear: time would not end until Abraham's heirs had multiplied as the stars of the sky and the sands of the sea (Gen. 22:17). This imagery testified to the idea of great numbers. It is the same imagery used by God with respect to the number of future generations of Israel.

The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, bath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations (Deut. 7:7-9).

Dispensational theologians insist they are literalists. They dismiss as hermeneutically ill-equipped anyone who refuses to accept their literal hermeneutic. But it is all a sham; they are literalists only when it is exegetically convenient. It is clear that there have not been a thousand literal generations of Israelites since God revealed these words to Moses. About 3,400 years have passed; something in the range of 36,600 years lie ahead of us if this passage is to be taken as literal. Taking off a thousand years for the millennium, this leaves 35,600 years until the imminent Rapture, give or take a century. This is not what Hal Lindsey had in mind when he wrote *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon*.

The language of thousand generations was invoked by God for the sake of comparison with the generations of covenant-breakers:

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments (Ex. 20:4-6).

The word thousands is here contrasted with third and fourth: number vs. number. Now we are up to 80,000 years, minimum. I do not think this is literal language; neither does any dispensationalist. Then what kind of language is it? Hyperbolic? Rhetorical? Symbolic?

It is covenantal language. It denotes law and promise. It refers to the huge blessings God has in store for covenant-keepers compared with short-term blessings and long-term

defeat for covenant breakers, beginning no later than a few generations. God "repayeth them that hate him to their face, to destroy them: he will not be slack to him that hateth him, he will repay him to his face" (Deut. 7:10).

When God speaks of the stars of heaven and the sand of the sea, He is speaking of a comprehensive triumph, just as when He speaks of a thousand generations. The sky is filled with stars. This does not imply that God's enemies will have ten skies filled with stars for each sky of Abraham's heirs, or ten seas of sand compared to Abraham's one. It implies the opposite: Abraham's heirs win, while their enemies lose. Who are the heirs of Abraham today? Christians: sons of the promise, sons of faith, (Rom. 4:12-13; Col. 4:16; Gal. 3:6-7, 14).

This sort of comprehensive victory has eluded Christians so far, I am not speaking here of literal generations and literal skies full of stars. I am speaking of the covenantal reality that undergirds such symbolic language. Christians today have advanced only marginally beyond what Abraham had accomplished in Genesis 15, despite the definitive legal advance due to Christ's ascension to the right hand of God. At least Abraham had just won a great victory over Chedorlaomer (Gen. 14) when God gave him the promise, When has the Church won a comparable victory? Not recently, surely.

Abraham knew that the end of time was not yet; things had to be fulfilled. These things still have to be fulfilled.

Eschatology and Commitment

Abraham had a multi-generational view of the future. Modern Christians do not. Moses had a view consistent with Abraham's. Modern Christians do not share Moses' outlook. Moses knew that God's people would conquer Canaan even though he would not enter the land. In contrast, God's people today are sure that Canaan has already conquered Christendom, and all traces of the Church would be stamped out soon were it not for (1) the imminent Rapture or (2) the imminent parousia. Even to speak favorably regarding the ideal of Christendom, let alone its future inevitable victory, brings down cries of outrage from amillennialists - "Constantinianism!" "theocratic tyranny!" - as well as from dispensationalists: "New Age optimism!"

Abraham worried that Eliezer the Damascan might inherit his household, and he hoped something might be done about this. Modern Christians have not worried about this. They have said over and over that if there is any long-term future on earth for the Church - highly doubtful - the Antichrist will progressively inherit. A dismal future lies ahead. Only our internal smiley faces will preserve us mentally in what has already become the cultural equivalent of a prisoner of war camp.

Abraham expected growth. Today's Christians expect contraction. Yes, we are told, there will continue to be successful missions efforts, but this legacy will fill, at best, only one small segment of the stars of the sky - Pisces, perhaps. When God promised Abraham heirs like the stars of the sky, he must have meant the stars of the sky on two or three evenings. What God apparently did not reveal to Abraham was that on all the other evenings, the stars of the sky would be Satan's.

Funny thing, though: when the Book of Revelation speaks of the stars of the sky, only a third of them are Satan's, and

they get extinguished, "And the fourth angel sounded, and the third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars; so as the third part of them was darkened, and the day shone not for a third part of it, and the night likewise" (Rev. 8:12). But in the non-literal calculations of dispensationalists and the nonsensical exegesis of amillennialists, the darkened one-third symbolizes victory, and the shining two-thirds symbolizes defeat.

Pessimillennialists argue that the stars refer to angels in the Book of Revelation. Indeed, they do. But stars reflect earthly processes. Abraham's heirs are to be numbered as the stars of heaven. Which stars? God's or Satan's? The winning stars or the losing stars?

Eschatology influences the degree of commitment. But the degree of commitment influences eschatology. Those who have a long-run eschatology are willing to commit a little each day on a long-term basis to rolling back the darkness. Those who take a short-term view of the time remaining must make a huge commitment, since there is little time for compound growth to take place. But even this commitment is too large; Christians cannot roll back humanism before, say, the year 2000 ("Rapture!"). They must define away the zones of Christian responsibility, so that a small commitment will be acceptable to God.

A brief period of commitment will not produce much. The goal of world evangelism is too large, even if the general culture is left in the hands of Satan's covenanted legions. This is why talk of worldwide revival has faded. Who still speaks of bringing the gospel to all men in one generation, the way the theologically liberal foreign missions promoter John R. Mott spoke a century ago? He died in the mid-1950's, when Protestant foreign missions were in tatters except for fundamentalist missions, which Mott quietly despised. Hardly anyone believes in Mott's vision today.

Those few visionaries who do believe it rarely mention the possibility that the whole world might actually respond in faith to this missions effort. In fact, premillennialist and amillennialists teach that the gospel will surely be rejected. The best we can hope for, we are assured, is to present the gospel to billions of people who will not accept it, thereby making them more responsible before God than they were before we preached to them (Luke 12:47-49). They will experience far worse torment for all eternity because of our gospel efforts.

If you want to know why Protestant foreign missions have fallen on hard times, search no farther, Eschatology matters.

Conclusion

The modern Church is not committed to civilization-wide growth. Local churches are committed to growth in principle, but the means of growth, which includes a vision of growth, are generally lacking. It takes a disciplined program of expansion for the average church to grow. This means a program consistent with the church's overall theology, including eschatology. The modern Church rejects the suggestion that there can ever be comprehensive Church growth sufficient to change the existing covenant-breaking culture. Abraham knew better. For him, the sky was the limit, and he did not mean the Rapture. His faith is not shared by this generation of his heirs.

This, too, shall pass.