

Systemic Evil and Over-Realised Eschatology

A Paper by Robert Jackson

Power at first to the needs of each-other's days
Simple to lose in the void sounds of anarchy's calling ways
All unaccounted for in the craziness of power...
Release, Release – Enough Controllers
Show some signs of appreciated loyalties

– *Release, Release, Yes (Tormato, 1978)*

This paper is put forward as a personal response to the “systemic evil” of the ICC as described by Henry Kreite in his paper “Honest to God”. This paper speaks very generally about issues which have had enormous variety in their severity and application among our congregations. Furthermore, these trends have varied enormously through time and from individual to individual in any given assembly. I ask every reader of this paper to take all the broad statements as generalisations which are based on the observations of one individual. It is not my intention to discredit or bring into disrepute the ICC or its members, a great number of whom have proven themselves to have the true spirit of Christ by speaking out and by humbly walking the path of repentance during our present crisis.

Henry Kreite has proven himself to have a true prophetic voice with his analysis of our present crisis. By diagnosing the “systemic evil” of our church in his paper, “Honest to God”, he has hit exactly on what is wrong with our church. It's not so much a problem of who's in power, or the bad things that this or that person has done. It not so much a problem of our attitude to or teaching of the Bible. The problem is the *evil* that has pervaded the *system* of our church – the *systemic* arrogance, suppression and abrasiveness. The system has failed us, and we all are victims of it.

I think it is neither a cop-out nor an over-reaction to describe our problems as a systemic evil. The specific “evils” which have occurred and which were perpetuated were primarily symptoms of the “Evil” of our system. How was our system (which was always spun out to be to church of God) so fundamentally poisoned by the abuse of power, the worship of money, and an ungodly chain of command? Henry does not deal with this in much detail – his unbridled focus is diagnosis, not hypothesising the cause.

Mike Cameron gives an incredibly helpful perspective in his “Discussion Paper on Discipling and Related Issues.” He develops the idea that our problems developed as an over-reaction to the problems of the Mainline COC. They had lukewarm Elders who continually undermined their zealous Evangelists. We have overreacted by having over-zealous Evangelists who have suppressed our Elders! This is one of many, many examples of how our evils are an over-reaction to other evils. How many times we have seen this throughout the history of Christendom!

I seek to offer a far more esoteric analysis of the basis of our systemic evil, by comparison with the over-realised eschatology of the Corinthian assembly.

From Calvary to Megiddo

- ✚ **Eschatos**: Extreme. A Greek word, meaning final, the end.
- ✚ **Eschatology**: “Concerns expectations of the end time, whether the close of history, the world itself, or the present age.” (Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible)
- ✚ **Our eschatological hope**: The hope shared by all disciples that we will be transformed on the Last Day and go to heaven.
- ✚ **Now/Not Yet**: A theological approach to the New Testament which focuses on where we stand in relation to eschatological truths. Some things are “now”, such as the Atonement, some things are “not yet”, such as the consummation of the Kingdom of God. A great number of theological truths are simultaneously “now” and “not yet”, such as our adoption into Christ (Romans 8:23).
- ✚ **Under-realised eschatology**: Focusing too much on what is to come (the Not Yet), and ignoring the eschatological victories that have already been won. (This was the sin of the Galatian church.)
- ✚ **Over-realised eschatology**: Focusing too much on what has already been achieved (the Now) and forgetting how much still stands between us and our heavenly exaltation. (This was the sin of the Corinthian church.)

Any reflection on the weight, the prevalence, the sheer depth of the sins in 1 Corinthians is sure to overwhelm the casual reader without understanding its root causes. To say that the church was full of factions, that brothers were sleeping with their step-mothers, that Christians were suing each-other, that they were sacrificing food to idols and getting drunk on the communion barely seems to scratch the surface.

They were also indulging in charismatic heresy, they were more focused on their romantic interests than God, they were rejecting apostolic authority, they were denying the resurrection – that church was messed up! You think Kreite had a lot of points in his paper – try turning 1 Corinthians into a list of problems and sins in the church – I bet you’ll have no trouble getting to 40 points! Obviously we should not joke about these things, but if we can’t ever be light-hearted about the past, then all we will do is cry.

Indeed, I could not help but to share in Henry Kreite’s tears.

As I was reading the first page of “Showing the Spirit, A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14” by D. A. Carson, I read that “one of the common denominators in the problems at the church in Corinth was over-realised eschatology.” I was floored. I was gasping for air. All of a sudden, it all made sense. From that day on, I have strived to take every possible opportunity to tell about why the church in Corinth was the way it was. Their misunderstanding of the cross and Judgement Day underlay all their sin. But it probably isn’t the kind of misunderstanding you think! They weren’t under-emphasising the cross, they were over-emphasising it!

They thought they were kings (4:8) – that they were the perfected people of God. After all, we have the entire inheritance of heaven (Galatians 4:1), we have been resurrected by our involvement with Jesus’ passion (Romans 6:3-4), we are the heirs of the promise, the people of God! Paul couldn’t help but go on and on and on about our *already realised* heavenly exaltation in Christ (Ephesians 2:6).

But this can be taken too far. The Corinthians figured that they were the consummated people of God, they were holy and pure, they had been cleansed, they had been immortalised – so that gave them license to do what they liked and follow their heart. That’s why they were so over-run by sexual immorality, because they were convinced that all of their desires must have been pure, so they felt free to act upon them.

That’s why they denied the resurrection – they *already had been* resurrected – so there is no need for another one! Their self-righteous elitism underlay their factionalism as well – they were each so confident, so justified in their opinion that the church had massive division. I could go on, but the point is self-evident. Every sin, every short-coming in the church of Corinth was due to their over-realised eschatology. They so exalted their *present standing* before God that they lost all sight of the fact that sin still reigns – we are *not yet* free from our sinful natures – there is still much need for vigilance (1 Corinthians 15:58).

For them, Megiddo had come and gone, and they were above it all. This is a very dangerous place to be. We’d be better off staying at Calvary for the time being. No wonder Paul opens the letter going on and on about the wisdom of the cross. No wonder he closes the letter going on and on about how much still needs to happen on Judgement Day. Are you gasping for air yet? Has the profound truth of this analysis dawned on you? At any rate, I must press on.

From Here to Eternity

I believe we have a great deal in common with our first century brothers and sisters in Corinth. The externalisation has been very different, but surely the root causes are very similar. The sheer arrogance and wilfulness of the church in Corinth (dealt with by Paul primarily in chapter 4) is shockingly similar to the systemic evil that has pervaded our fellowship. They were rich, they were kings, they were honoured, they were so wise and well-spoken of among themselves. How polished they must have been, what a great spin they must have put on all their shameful practices! It’s as if there is no passage of Scripture which as usefully mirrors Kreite’s paper as 1 Corinthians 4!

Do not go beyond what is written – what makes you different from anyone else? quoth the Apostle. Why have we added so many rules, taken such liberties with the Scriptures? Some of you have become arrogant, accuses Paul, speaking plainly and to the point. We have a multi-award winning news program, conferences at world-renowned locations – how much we have honoured ourselves, how many monuments we have built!

Why? Because we are “God’s Modern Day Movement”; God’s gift to the world. We’re on a spiritual plane far above all those other churches – they have it all wrong, we have it all right, because we are the people of God. “One True Church” is a doctrine that has been held to as a matter of spiritual life and death. A majority of those who have left our fellowship have, most likely, really fallen away. But is it because they really wanted to leave God? Perhaps not in every case, no. Perhaps it is because they could not stand the culture of leadership in our church, but had simultaneously become convinced that no other church had the truth. They either had to put up with our sinful church culture or “leave God”.

Many realised that this was a lie and that, as the Bible teaches, a disciple will take her God with her wherever she goes. There are, at any rate, untold numbers of Mainline COC's out there which are, by and large, built on a good biblical foundation. We need to be Christians only, but we are not the only Christians.

While the number of people we have driven away from God is *the most damning indictment* of our systemic evil, it is only one of many symptoms of it. The abrasive arrogance of our leadership was psychologically justified by an assessment that “God is with us”, we are his people, we are upholding his truth. This sure conviction of ours was used as a license to indulge in all kinds of hideous excesses. This can be characterised theologically as over-realised eschatology.

We put untrained, inexperienced Christians over older ones, over Bible discussions, over regions, over who knows what else. This is a complete reversal of the mentoring relationships we see throughout the Bible. We have harshly rebuked person after person, often when we barely even knew them! Study out rebuking in the Gospels: Aside from Jesus' rebukes of demons, fevers and storms, what we are left with are many sinful rebukes by unspiritual disciples and the like, and only three personal rebukes actually done by Jesus. He rebukes Peter in Matthew 16 (and parallels), he rebukes the sons of Thunder in Luke 9:55, and he rebukes the disciples in Mark 16:14. All are instances of gross sin, all are done in private, and all are done only after years of faith and trust have been built. Jesus takes the individuals aside in Matthew 16 and Luke 9, and in Mark 16 he does it only in the hearing of the afflicted parties. Jesus' only public rebuke is the Seven Woes.

The most telling passage is probably Luke 19:39 – how much like the Pharisees we have become. Jesus responds to their harsh, ungodly request by *defending* his disciples, and then *weeping* over Jerusalem.

Why have we assumed ourselves to have so much more authority than Jesus? Why have we usurped His authority and used it in tyrannical ways that he *would never have dreamed* of using it? When Paul says to instruct and rebuke with “all authority”, he means to only do it in accordance with “The Authority”, God's Word. We have rebuked people about their hair style, about not wearing make up (what ever happened to 1 Peter 3:3-4?), about not having visitors to church. Why have we gone so far beyond the Bible's authority? Why have we so harshly bound what God has not?

It is because we believed *ourselves* to have “all authority”. It was actually a revelation to many leaders when Al Baird pointed out that authorities other than the church *do* exist in God's eyes (Romans 13)! We have become kings. We have claimed the authority over angels, the authority over every aspect of people's lives.

Top Down

Perhaps the biggest difference between our over-realised eschatology and the Corinthians' is that ours has been limited to our “clergy”. As everything that we have put our faith in as “God's movement” has awkwardly disintegrated before our eyes, the divide between our clergy and laity became a gulf. A gulf between who was “sharp” and who was not; who was “going for it” and “biting at the bit” and who wasn't – in other

words, who was in favour with the ministry staff and who was not. As our churches have shrunk and shrunk, as every trophy was removed from the shelf, as the continual explosions and rebukes fell on increasingly inert ears, our clergy/laity became entrenched.

And, as I'm sure you have already become convinced of, the over-realised eschatology which I am accusing us of was very, very centred on the clergy. Our "out group", our "lukewarm fringe" (which, as we defined it, was effectively the large majority of the church), has been almost entirely innocent of over-realised eschatology.

The real theological tension that the Corinthian heresy seemed to have created was their denial of the resurrection. They had taken their system so far that the whole concept of a coming Judgement, and final consummation, was out of favour. In this regard, the great heresy in which we have found ourselves was a denial of the very nature of the Kingdom of God. That eternal, cosmic, heavenly dwelling, with borders unseen, with bounds incomprehensible, which is timeless, spaceless – a new earth, known only to God. God, may your Kingdom come! How we have profaned such an amazing, spiritual reality. How could we ever have taken Matthew 6:33 to mean "serve the church", when Jesus is saying to seek heavenly exaltation? We have become the Sadducees: materialists who drained any spiritual meaning and reality from the Scriptures.

We have been sore, sore victims of our over-realised eschatology, which has had the boldness to claim the Kingdom as being realised. We have usurped God's heavenly angel armies – we have stolen their job and proclaimed "Kingdom come" in their absence! God has harsh words for those who usurp the authority of His angels (2 Peter 2:10-11).

But anyway, back to the clear observation that only the clergy has been fully culpable in this matter. This gets to the heart of the real contradiction of our over-realised eschatology, which is the fact that our fellowship has been assailed by it in our leadership, but simultaneously paralysed by under-realised eschatology. So now I have more explaining to do.

There and Back Again

Our intense guilt and legalism has stemmed from our under-realised eschatology, the sin of the Galatians, who so minimised the importance of the cross that they had become convinced that they once again needed to work their way back to God. We know a lot more about this sin, and it probably isn't hard for you to join the dots and see that the root of legalism is under-realised eschatology. We focus so much on our sin, on what we need to do, on how we don't "measure up", that we forget that we have been raised in Christ, seated with Him in heaven, that His sacrificial death continually cleanses us of sin, that His righteousness stands in place of our unrighteousness. We approach the New Testament as "The Old Testament, Part 2" – just another rulebook, a list of do's and don'ts. No wonder we have the sin lists memorised, and no idea where to turn for teachings on God's grace.

How could this massive contradiction possibly exist? How can it be possible for the same fellowship to be assailed by over-realised eschatology and paralysed by under-realised eschatology *at the same time*? I think the answer is simple.

It's because we're simply ignorant of eschatology in general.

We have so little real understanding of how the cross fits in with the cosmic plan of God, how the ascension of Christ is a living prophecy of the new bodies we will receive, how our spirits are dwelling with God at this moment, how God has entrusted us with a spiritual estate, and will liquidate it on the last day. We have no idea about the dynamic tension between Now and Not Yet in which we live and breath every moment of every day – that we are still *awaiting* our adoption (Romans 8:23), that everything that God has ever made is desperately yearning for the final day, when God's sons will be exalted (Romans 8:19).

We are eschatologically illiterate; ignorant of these matters of the spirit. Perhaps there is simply no systematic way to theologially quantify our belief system. We've simply been wishy-washy! We have not paid attention to the question of what our standing is in the spirit-world, and what relation our actions have to the end of days. This gross spiritual negligence has profoundly misled us; we have been thorough-going victims of our ignorance of God's present-day and future activity.

Now we *are* children of God, but what we will be has *not yet* been made known, quoth the Apostle in 1 John 3. We can't guarantee that our church will never "go off the rails" again. If we could guarantee that kind of thing, then we would no longer have any need for faith in God at all! And if we lost our faith, we would lose our salvation! So be careful what you wish for, you just may get it.

However, I believe that the best we can do is to 1) aim to have a leadership structure of the church that mirrors what God lays down, and gives freedom where God is silent and 2) equip people eschatologically – the Gospels probably being the best place to start. But, since this has been such an esoteric analysis, I will avoid saying anything more practical than that!