

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Year of Saint Paul

Part 3: The Eschatology of Saint Paul¹

There is a lot of talk these days about the end times. The “Left Behind” book series and the recent passing of the millennium both spurred talk and concern about the end of the world. More recently, the ancient Mayan prediction that a significant change will happen to the world in 2012 has revived eschatological conversations.

The word “eschatology” refers to the study of last things. It is the part of theology and philosophy that is concerned with the details of the end of the world. A person’s belief about the end of the world can greatly influence his or her ideas about life and faith. Take Saint Paul for example. His belief that Jesus was returning very soon influenced the way he lived his life and influenced what he preached to other Christians.

There is no doubt that Saint Paul expected Christ to return before he and the other apostles died. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul wrote—

Indeed, we tell you this, on the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will surely not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself, with a word of command, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, will come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

-1 Thessalonians 4:15-17

This belief in Jesus’ imminent return influenced Paul’s perception of human activity. He was concerned that Christians might become overly focused on the everyday activities of life and forget about the Second Coming. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul explained how marriage and work would be impacted by Christ’s return—

I tell you, brothers, the time is running out. From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away.

-1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Paul wanted to his readers to know that their full attention needed to be focused on their salvation in Christ Jesus. It would have seemed ridiculous to Paul for Christians to go about their day as if the world would never change. Life *was* changing! The world *was* changing! Saint Paul understood that Christ’s life and death had ushered in the last age and changed all of creation!

Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed, in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

-1 Corinthians 15:51-52, 58

As Christians today, we are left with the challenge of letting Paul’s eschatology energize our faith and influence how we live without being pulled into the sensationalism of our culture’s current obsession and concern with the end of the world.

¹ In honor of the “Year of Saint Paul,” this is part three of a ten part series on his life and writings.