

Pie in the sky when you die?

Introduction

For some decades now Charismatic churches, and especially the radical restorationist ones, have berated the traditional encouragement of pointing to heaven as the place of the fulfilment of blessing. They disparaged the concept of living sacrificially in this life today and trusting all to a hope in Christ to be received at the Last Day. They denied the traditional concept of being a pilgrim, a term they never use, and castigated the pilgrimage view as being 'pie in the sky when you die'.

Now evangelicals, to my knowledge, never used this phrase of themselves but it was often applied by outsiders, with a sneer, and even picked up in traditional and popular songs; particularly those of the vaudeville variety. For supposed Christians to disparage their brethren with a label poached from the world is already something to be greatly saddened by, but this view also reveals a grossly mistaken understanding.

Restorationist or Dominionist Charismatics (those who want to triumphantly change the world and trust they will one day run it) are far from being within the ambit of Biblical theology and even far from traditional historic Christianity. This theology betrays a dangerously materialistic and earthy worldview, which leads to a thorough misunderstanding of the Bible, a false hope, and the production of dead works. One reason why Charismatic churches are, in reality, spiritually barren is that they have renounced pilgrimage and set their attention on this present world, seeking to build churches that have secular credibility, political influence, material success and financial resources.

The Biblical position

Though used in a derogative way, the sense behind the abusive term is correct. Believers do not set any store upon this life on earth and live sacrificially, setting all their hopes 'on the above'. This is the directive of the apostle Paul,

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ *who is* our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Col 3:1-4

So, there can be no doubt; we are to 'set our mind on things above, not on things on the earth' (the literal Greek is: 'mind the things upwards', or 'mind the above, i.e. heaven'). There are no shades of meaning here, no way that we can reverse the order. We must not concentrate on earthly things but on heavenly things. Charismatics reverse the divine order; the bible says mind spiritual things not earthly things.

Other apostles agree with Paul;

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that *is* in the world -- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life -- is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. 1 Jn 2:15-17

We know what the Lord Jesus thinks of his followers who turn to their attention of the world since he rebuked a disciple for just thinking in earthly terms -

But He turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offence to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.’ Matt 16:23

Peter had viewed Christ’s mission in an earthly sense and failed to see the spiritual importance of his death. If we are mindful of earthly things instead of God’s will as revealed in Scripture, we will offend him. Concentrating upon doing things in an earthly way is not only an affront to the Lord but is also an alliance with the devil.

It is an evil of huge proportions to lose focus upon heaven and spiritual things and replace it with a strategy that centres upon building something special in this world. God is angry with such.

Any time a man strives to go beyond simply meeting together in a house and seeking to edify the saints, equipping them to serve, he loses sight of God. All those who want to build large churches that meet in big buildings and make a lot of noise on Sunday are already far from the will of God. Worse still are those that declare that their intention is to ‘take whole towns’, to have influence over a region or to control hundreds of churches.

The job of a pastor is to train up people by solid doctrinal instruction so that they are built up into strong saints who can then serve God effectively. The divine pattern for this edification is in the local church, which is small in numbers and meets in a home centred upon breaking bread. As growth occurs he does not collect them into a large body or organisation, but splits them up into multiple churches where mutual ministries can flourish. This is what Jesus means when he says that saints are like salt on the earth – not in a big mass but small pieces spread about having a general significance, but not seen. Salt is to be tasted in a meal, not stared at in one lump.

Seek those things which are above, where Christ is

The attention of the believer must always be set upon Christ and his spiritual goals. The denigration of ‘pie in the sky when you die’ is a looking towards heaven with the implication being that you are ‘too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use’; but this is rubbish. Only by looking to Christ and having heavenly priorities can a believer do anything of any use.

Abraham had a great effect on the world and is pictured in the Bible as the foundation of faith. He is the first who was openly rewarded with a covenant of blessing (the Gospel) for having faith and being accounted as righteous. As such he is the rock from which we are cut (Isa 51:1-2). As a result of God’s calling out, he was given faith and blessed. In his walk on earth he did many great things, founded two great nations and became the father of many more in the Gospel. Being granted Canaan as his inheritance he treated the material possession very lightly, even allowing his nephew to have the best portion; a man who was not even called by God. The reason why Abraham was not bothered with his earthly dominions and lived all his life in a tent was that he looked for a city that has foundations, a heavenly city,

By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as *in* a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker *is* God. Heb 11:9-10

Abraham’s hope was in the new heavenly Jerusalem, the spiritual inheritance of the sons of God. He did not waste time building a city in the land God gave him to compete with the cities of the local inhabitants, he set his hope on the above.

Abraham is an example to all believers to treat this world lightly and not grasp the things in the world. The place where our full blessing will be revealed is heaven, not this earth.

Those who set their store on the earth will be greatly disappointed on the Last Day when all they built will be burned up.

All the patriarchs lived with this pilgrimage attitude:

These [Abel, Enoch, Noah Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph] all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced *them* and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them. Heb 11:13-16

The believer is a stranger on the earth, a sojourner, someone passing through; he is someone seeking a homeland in heaven. God is not ashamed to be the God of such people and prepares a heavenly inheritance for such. He is not happy with those who seek a homeland here on earth.

The wrong position

The basis of the wrong position is to seek to obtain an inheritance here and now on earth instead of in heaven. It is a position associated with those who claim that the kingdom of God is fully manifest in material power now, that the kingdom is present on earth in all the spiritual fulness of the power of God. Despite the command of Jesus for us to pray daily that the kingdom would come, these people insist that the kingdom has already come and is present in their ministry.

This is an utter failure to understand the decree of God in salvation. God's decree to save is based upon his decree to elect a people in Christ, for Christ to atone for their sin and for the Spirit to bring those elect to heaven. The decree of election is not yet completely fulfilled since there are many elect not yet born, hence the world continues to run. The world will run until the last elect person is saved and then Christ returns in glory to bring in the fulness of the kingdom and reign in a new heaven and a new earth. The kingdom is not consummated until all these things have occurred and sin is removed from the earth. Thus no believer enters into the fulness of his salvation until he has a new resurrected body and is fully sanctified.

Charismatic claims based upon the fulness of the kingdom are completely false, resting upon poor theological ideas about salvation. They are also connected to a wrong eschatology. Charismatic dominionist ideas are based upon a triumphant postmillennialism which claims that things get better and better, resulting in a global situation where the church rules the world through super-powered apostles and prophets. This is an utter failure to appreciate Biblical statements that things actually get worse and worse resulting in global persecution of the church under a totalitarian government. Ignoring this, Charismatics seek to build a material kingdom on the earth based upon large churches ruled by apostles and prophets. This reverses Christ's statement that his kingdom is not of this world but is heavenly (Jn 18:36).

This false position not only ignores Biblical statements and direct commands of Christ, but actually reverses them. Instead of a spiritual kingdom it seeks to build a material one. Instead of looking upwards to heavenly things they focus downwards on material things. Instead of worshipping in Spirit and truth they worship according to human sensuality. Instead of living a spiritual pilgrimage they build empires on earth. Instead of looking to Christ alone they look to men. Instead of preparing for global apostasy and totalitarianism, they expect things to get better. Instead of condemning the massive deceptions abounding in the world they contribute towards them.

We can illustrate this position in the following imaginary church, though the scenario is quite common. Its membership is 600 people and it meets in a purpose-built large industrial shed that cost a million pounds to purchase and fit out. To produce this finance the people centred all their giving to this building project and even gave more to the church than normal in various gift days dedicated to it. The church is submitted to the authority of an apostle who dominates church strategy through a hierarchical system of leaders. He claims to hear from God directly and then passes on this information, through the layers of leadership, to the people, who are expected to comply and can offer no questions. His strategy is centred on 'taking' the town, which involves having a large, influential presence and attracting outsiders to big meetings that involve loud bands, entertaining 'worship', drama and whipped up enthusiasm. Success is measured in numerical and financial terms. Ministerial power is measured by bogus claims to heal and manifest miracles; testimonies are usually due to emotional adrenaline rushes that give temporary relief of pain. This is a church that is earthy and man centred. It is not Biblical by any spiritual measurement.

The Christian hope is an anchor to the soul

... we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This *hope* we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence *behind* the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, *even* Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. Heb 6:19-20

There are two aspects to our hope. The first is the promise of salvation and eternal life, which most Christians understand and which needs little explanation. We do not see the fulness of salvation yet because we have an earthly body that will only be transformed at the coming of Christ. Until our body is metamorphosed to be like Christ's body, and until we are fully sanctified by the power of God, we cannot properly experience salvation or heaven. This Christian hope is faith in the promise of God that a believer has the gift of eternal life in Christ and that they will one day be like him, fit for heaven. This is the most important aspect of our hope and it is a looking to Christ for our complete salvation.

However, there is another aspect to our hope as we walk in this world. As well as trusting in Christ for life, the believer is also building an inheritance which is kept undefiled for him in heaven, ready to be revealed at the last Day (1 Pt 1:3-5). This inheritance is the building up of rewards that result from faith-works. Though all of salvation is by free grace, and though God has no obligation to do anything more for us, he sovereignly chooses to reward our obedience to his word. Even a cup of cold water given away in the name of Christ will receive a reward.

Thus denigrating believers for thinking about 'pie in the sky when you die' is an incredibly foolish thing to do. It is those believers who set their store on heaven and not this world that will receive a full inheritance in the new world. These rewards have to do with authority and responsibility in the kingdom of God, which Jesus symbolises as being a prince over several cities (Lk 19:12-24). Those who focus upon heavenly things and live a sacrificial life here will be greatly rewarded in heaven. Those believers who ignore building for a heavenly future will suffer loss at the Last Day. Loss of rewards is not only the punishment for failing our ethical obligations to Christ but also result from believing the wrong things or associating with those who believe the wrong things. Notice John's words spoken during a time of apostasy in the church,

For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ *as* coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but *that* we may receive a full reward. Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father

and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds. 2 Jn 1:7-11

This plainly teaches us that rewards can be lost and that the loss of rewards accompanies fellowshiping with those who teach heresy. Tolerating and supporting those who hold blasphemous doctrines (and there are many of these present in the church today) share in the evil deeds of those who teach them. Clearly the inheritance of those who refuse to remove themselves from heretical doctrine and false teachers in the church will be much reduced compared to those who do.

So the fulness of our salvation and the receipt of a full inheritance constitute the hope of the Christian, and these fall into the category of pilgrimage, which is derided by the foolish as 'pie in the sky when you die'.

Flee for refuge

Those who truly hold a pilgrimage hope have 'fled for refuge' to faith in Christ's promise of eternal life. The fleeing to the hope necessitates a fleeing from being earth bound. Laying hold of the hope involves a fleeing from your previous situation that was without hope. There is no hope in this world; there is only hope in fleeing from this world. If you are holding on to this world, if your agenda is based upon this world, then you have not fled for refuge to the hope in Christ.

The danger of the wrong hope

Now if the Christian hope is setting our minds on the things above, focusing upon Christ and heavenly priorities, then what happens if we set our minds upon earthly things?

The true hope is an anchor to the soul; therefore a wrong hope results in no anchor to the soul. The soul is the executor of the life, the driving engine of the personality comprising of emotions, volition and mind. If the soul has no proper foundation then the personality is unstable and the life work of such a person is dead and fruitless.

The souls of those who set their minds on earthly priorities are unstable and without foundation. We should expect to see a lack of spiritual strength in the lives of those who are set upon an earthly course – and this is exactly what we do find. The characteristics of those committed to dominionist Charismatic churches are a lack of doctrinal certainty, susceptibility to false doctrines, earth-bound priorities, sensual worship, will worship and a lack of understanding of what the true Gospel is. Claiming to worship Christ they not only fail to put him in the centre of their strategies but they fail to obey his commandments; indeed they deny that there are any commandments to obey.

If our objectives are earthly, then our soul is without hope and strength.

Conclusion

The denigrating taunt, 'pie in the sky when you die' is demeaning to a believer. It wrongly berates those it is aimed at and scandalises those who say it. Far from this attitude being wrong, the true Christian position is setting one's mind on heaven and spiritual priorities and leaving earthly aspirations behind. Those who fail to do this should learn from the lesson of Lot's wife who looked back to worldly aspirations and turned into a pillar of salt.

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