The Spirit Told Me So! The Role of Prophecy in Corinth’s Realized Eschatology

Brigidda Zapata

Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians portrays a congregation that believes itself to be already eschatologically fulfilled, living in the new kingdom of the Lord. The identification of realized eschatology in Corinth presents the issue of locating the factor that caused this deviation from Pauline thought. Prophecy appears as a strong contender, and Anthony Canham and Michael Thiselton have previously established connections between realized eschatology and prophecy, however they both position the exalted Corinthian prophecy as a result of realized eschatology. Elaborating on the positions of Thiselton and Canham, I suggest a reversal of their propositions, stating rather that an exalted prophecy can produce, due to its association with the new kingdom, the understanding of the fulfillment of eschatology. Prophecy is the cause for the Corinthian community’s realized eschatology, and Paul’s address seeks to reassert his authority over the fractional community by imposing epistemological boundaries around their prophetic claims to knowledge. He positions himself hierarchically above their prophecy, claiming a superior spiritual knowledge than that which the congregation possesses.

The nature of the problem underlying the difficulties that the Corinthian community faced has been much discussed in scholarship, and many academics have appealed to the theory that realized eschatology provides the best context in which to understand the First Letter to the Corinthians.¹ Paul’s letter portrays the community as mistakenly believing

---

¹ Among those who I have cited in this paper A. D. Nock, E. Käsemann, Michael Canham and Anthony Thiselton.
themselves to have obtained salvation and already be living in the new kingdom of God. This problem of realized eschatology is most prominently observed in 1 Cor 4:8, in which Paul rebukes the congregation: "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you!" This passage is often taken as simply a sarcastic remark, but it can also be understood as representative of the Corinthian’s own self description.\(^2\) In this view, Paul’s rebuttal is more forceful and mocking because these lines are juxtaposed with Paul’s own status of spiritual humility and physical poverty at 1 Cor 4:10-13.\(^3\)

The previous verses are particularly telling of the Corinthian situation and the realized eschatology that informed their actions. Despite the strong case that these lines constitute, scholars such as Earl Ellis have expressed concern that realized eschatology be assumed solely on the basis of 1 Cor 4:8,\(^4\) but Paul’s correction of realized eschatology is far more pervasive in this letter. One of the most prominent devices he uses are subtle references to the kingdom as positioned in the future. For example, as early on in the epistle as the thanksgiving, Paul says "...as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1:7b-8; my italics). His wording positions the parousia in the future, stressing that Jesus has not yet returned, and the Day of the Lord has not yet come.\(^5\) It is also necessary to highlight that in his emphasis on the future, Paul does not undercut the present


\(^3\) *Ibid.*., 318.


\(^5\) Canham, *op. cit.*, 311.
nature of the kingdom, reminding the Church that the event that Jesus set in motion, although not consummated, is in progress. This differentiation is important in terms of placing prophecy as a sign of the end of the ages, but not as a sign of the fulfillment of the age.

The issue of realized eschatology in Corinth has been discussed at length in secondary literature, but surprisingly, few of the proponents of this approach have provided an account of the origin of this belief in the community. Among those who have, worth mentioning is A.D. Nock who proposes that the conversion experience is understood as a rebirth into a new plane of existence, which could have been construed by the Corinthians as the eschatological kingdom itself. E. Käsemann has also put forward a similar suggestion, stating that the concept of salvation through baptism had been taken literally by the community, causing them to believe that they had transcended this world.

A solution that has not yet been looked at in terms of the cause of the Corinthian congregation’s realized eschatology is the phenomenon of prophecy. Prophecy is an underlying theme throughout First Corinthians, and it is raised as early as the second chapter, where Paul reminds his congregation that he proclaimed the gospel "not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1Cor 2:4). In this passage Paul's identification with the Spirit positions him above the congregation, who he contrasts by calling “people of the flesh” (1 Cor 3:3), asserting his spiritual superiority over the community. Despite critiquing the congregation’s spiritual maturity and

---

emphasising their worldly flaws, Paul does not however deny the presence of the Spirit
within them.

In examining some of the individual issues related to prophecy within the letter, their
connection to eschatology can be discerned. Prophecy, specifically speaking in tongues, is
referred to by Paul as the language of angels (13:1), and although this verse is often seen as a
hyperbole, within the context of realized eschatology Michael Canham suggests that it could
be the community’s own description of the phenomenon. If the Corinthians believed that
they were living in heaven, then they surely could speak the language of the heavenly beings.\(^9\)
This would also account for the Church’s resistance to the limitation of tongues, seeing as it
was proof of their exalted status that they spoke in the language of the new kingdom.\(^10\)

Anthony Thiselton has previously pointed out the relationship between prophecy
and realized eschatology in his article “Realized Eschatology at Corinth,” where he points to
the early Christian belief of the pouring out of the Spirit in the last days.\(^11\) Presumably
Thiselton is assuming a parallel between the tradition of Acts 10:44-48 with the multiple
Pauline allusions to the presence of the Spirit in each individual member of the
congregation. He further states that “distortions or imbalance in the area of eschatology
stand in direct causal relationship to [what Paul would consider] errors about the gifts and
work of the Holy Spirit.”\(^12\) This would imply that Thiselton attributes the Corinthians’
mistaken charismatic enthusiasm which Paul corrects, to the early Christian eschatological
tradition which they have misinterpreted.

\(^9\) Canham, op. cit., 339-40.
\(^10\) Ibid., 340.
\(^11\) Ibid., 513.
\(^12\) Thiselton, op. cit., 512.
Thiselton’s argument could easily be reformulated so as to state that the fullness of the Spirit which the congregation experienced appeared to them as a sign of the fullness of the kingdom. In fact, where Thiselton and Canham argue that “an over-realized eschatology leads to an ‘enthusiastic’ view of the Spirit,” I would suggest that all evidence for this can be reversed so as to demonstrate that an ‘enthusiastic’ view of the Spirit can lead to the notion of fulfilled eschatology. In this instance, Canham’s interpretation of angelic language as a requirement for the Corinthians’ heavenly existence would be understood instead as evidence of the community’s heavenly existence. This reversal demonstrates that prophecy can be seen as the cause for the Corinthian’s realized eschatology.

The pouring out of the Spirit is also directly related to the first issue that Paul addresses in First Corinthians, which is the division of the Church at Corinth. A. D. Nock points out that of the four factions that Corinth is divided into at 1 Cor 1:12, Christ does not fit into the pattern of human leaders mentioned here; the faction of Christ could however be conceived of as a group of people who receive divine revelation and therefore attribute their leadership to Christ. Canham picks up this line of thinking and describes the situation as follows:

The 'last days' (which we are currently experiencing) were inaugurated by the Holy Spirit's being poured out indiscriminately on all believers -- not just apostles (such as Paul), disciples of Christ (as Peter), or eloquent preachers (as Apollos). (...) Since the "fullness of time" has now arrived (cf. Gal 4:4), we are now "the spiritual ones" (πνευµατικοί) who have entered into the Age of the Spirit. Since we have all "wisdom" (...) and full "knowledge" (...), we don't need anyone else (such as Apollos, Peter, and especially Paul) to teach us anything!

13 Ibid.
14 A. D. Nock, op. cit., 173.
15 Canham, op. cit., 314.
In this way, Canham interprets 1 Cor 1:12 as demonstrative of the community’s rejection of Pauline authority; the purpose of the letter then is for Paul to reassert his authority over the community. Canham argues that Paul attempts this through a correction of the Church’s eschatological outlook, telling them, especially through chapters three and four, that they have not yet reached the end and are still in need of his guidance.\(^{16}\) However, in view of prophecy being the cause of realized eschatology, Paul’s reassertion of authority is more strongly constituted in his redefinition of prophecy and its proper place within the Church (principally in 1 Cor 12:14) thereby attacking the root of the Corinthian’s misunderstanding.

While prophecy in early Christianity could take on multiple forms such as exhortative, consoling, encouraging and admonitions,\(^{17}\) the Corinthian prophecies appear to be revelatory in nature from their appeal to Christ and rejection of human authority. The prophets of early Christianity claimed no part in their revelations, they were important because they were the medium through which the ultimate authority spoke, namely God, Christ, or another angelic figure, however the prophets themselves possessed no knowledge.\(^{18}\) In claiming Christ as their leader, the prophets at Corinth have accepted their prophetic message as authentic, and because prophecy was understood to be a direct and unmediated message from the divine it would be accepted over and above the message of the apostle. It is clear that this was the case in Corinth because Paul felt obliged to correct the Church’s hierarchical order and place apostles above prophets to assert his authority (1 Cor 12:28). Through this understanding of prophecy and prophets, the Corinthian dilemma

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 315.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 204.
can be seen as a result of prophecy, which, by virtue of its authoritativeness as the unmediated message of God, would have been deemed a true sign of the times which superseded all other authoritative claims to knowledge, including apostolic. In this way, through prophecy, the Corinthians have understood themselves to have entered into the new kingdom.

Laura Nasrallah has identified the epistemological aspect of the First Letter to the Corinthians in the relation between prophecy and authority. She sees the epistle primarily as an attempt of the apostle to reassert his authority over the community by correcting their mistakes, which he does by drawing appropriate boundaries around their claims to knowledge. If Paul can prove that the Corinthians’ claim to knowledge is faulty, then they can no longer assert precedence over the apostle’s authority. 1 Cor 13 constitutes Paul’s ultimate rebuttal of the entire matter of prophecy because he does “not want you to be uninformed” (1 Cor 12:1b). Here he expounds one definite objection to the Corinthian understanding of knowledge, prophecy, and eschatology. He says that tongues will not last forever, because tongues are prophecy, and prophecy is only partial knowledge. This is a confirmation of the revelatory aspect of Corinthian prophecy; prophecy is revelation, but in the kingdom everything will be revealed, so the partial knowledge that prophecy constitutes will cease, giving way to full knowledge (1 Cor 13:8-12). Prophecy cannot then be a sign of the fullness of the kingdom, rather, it is a sign of the earthly age, where knowledge is partial. The sign of prophecy was misinterpreted by the Church at Corinth.

---

Many of the authors that I have cited identified a relationship between prophecy and the Corinthian’s realized eschatology, but none of them located prophecy at the beginning of the relationship. Prophecy was the factor that informed the development of the Corinthian’s eschatology, and its divine claim gave the prophets the authority to assert their teachings over those of Paul. For the Corinthian community, the fullness of the Spirit was a sign of the ages which through its authority became a message of the consummation of the times; in other words, if speaking in tongues was a sign of the kingdom, but as a form of prophecy it was considered divinely inspired and therefore an authoritative sign, then its message of the realized kingdom would also be authoritative.

The issues that Paul addresses in the First Letter to the Corinthians can all be understood as arising as a consequence of the idea of realized eschatology, but they cannot be seen as contributing to the formation of this understanding. Prophecy and speaking in tongues are the only signs of the ages that could have informed the community. It is important to consider that the nature of the epistle is corrective; Paul appears to know the reason for the misinterpretation of his eschatological message since he sought to remedy it with his address. The issue of prophecy is the most pervasive and constant theme addressed in First Corinthians, and again, the only one that could be understood in a causal relationship to eschatology as the originator of the idea.

In light of what has been discussed, and the conclusion of prophecy as the cause of the Corinthian’s eschatological enthusiasm, Paul himself cannot be blamed for the congregation’s oversight. The message of realized eschatology that the Corinthians adopted was not Paul’s original message, but a distortion of it. As E. Ellis points out, it is unlikely
that Paul would have attacked his own theology in a public address to one of his communities. What the Church had misunderstood was not Paul’s message but the significance of prophecy and speaking in tongues. The authoritative nature of prophecy was such that the congregation carried Paul’s theology to its logical extreme through the misinterpreted sign of prophecy. Paul recognizes this and uses the letter as an occasion to reassert his authority over the now divided community, through the correction of the epistemological boundaries of prophecy for the community, and a restatement of his eschatological doctrine.

The Corinthian community believed that they had already obtained salvation, and were living in the new kingdom of God. The tradition of the descent of the Spirit at the end of the ages had led them to interpret their fullness of Spirit as a sign that they were already fulfilled. With these reasons in mind, Paul addresses the First Epistle to the Corinthians to reassert his authority over a factional community which has deviated from his eschatological message, and he attempts this through drawing epistemological boundaries around their source of knowledge: prophecy. This is principally achieved by indicating that their understanding of prophecy is fallacious and by establishing a hierarchical structure in which he positions himself over prophets, claiming superior spiritual authority, something he has already stated in earlier chapters (cf. 1Cor3:3). Recognizing prophecy as the cause of the Corinthian community’s exalted views is fundamental to understanding the text of First Corinthians; as it was a result of prophecy and its divine claim that the community deviated from Paul’s message, it is over prophecy itself which Paul must assert himself. First

20 Ellis in Anthony C. Thiselton, op. cit., 511.
Corinthians illustrates Paul’s struggle to show that his authority as an apostle is greater than the authority of prophecy.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


