

The Delay of the Parousia and the Inner Coherence of Paul's Eschatology

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It has often been maintained that the eschatology of the N.T., and especially that of Paul's writings, was transformed from the expectation of the soon return of Christ, to a delayed eschatology, when faced with the disappointment arising from the failure of this expectation. A L Moore explains the process as described by Schweitzer.

Following upon the loss, in the 2nd century, of "the expectation of the immediate dawn of the Messianic kingdom," Paul's thought (according to Schweitzer) was misunderstood, was Hellenised and translated into non-eschatological terms. The process was begun before the hope in a speedy coming of the Kingdom died, so that when the continued Parousia delay led eventually to the abandonment of an eschatological hope, a Hellenistic dogmatic system replaced it without disturbance.¹

Moore suggests that the "disappointment" on which Schweitzer's eschatology is built, is not consistent with the continued existence and vibrancy of the church, as other groups whose Messianic expectations failed either returned to orthodox Judaism or lingered on as a small sect until it died out.² Moore cites the suggestion of Cullmann that "if Jesus had so confidently expected an early parousia, then the church would surely have abandoned its allegiance to him after the 'cardinal error' had been exposed."³ The suggestion (by Schweitzer and M Werner) that this disappointment led to the Hellenisation of Christianity is countered by Moore who suggests rather it is at least possible that Hellenisation was a result of human faithlessness and for this reason explains the loss of the expectancy of the return of Christ in the church's faith and life.⁴ Moore summarises his criticisms of Schweitzer's "consistent eschatology" with the comment that

¹ A L Moore. **The Parousia in the New Testament**. Leiden: E J Brill, 1966, p. 36.

² A L Moore. **The Parousia in the New Testament**, p. 47.

³ A L Moore. **The Parousia in the New Testament**, p. 95, citing O Cullmann. "Das Wahre durch die ausgebliebene Parusie gestellte neutestamentliche Problem." *Theologische Zeitschrift* 3 (1947) 177f.

⁴ A L Moore. **The Parousia in the New Testament**, p. 48.

...the narrowness and one-sidedness of the methodology involved and of the interpretation offered is very apparent. The expectation of apocalyptic (certainly as Schweitzer understands it) cannot do justice to the soteriological understanding of Jesus' life and death which we find throughout the New Testament. Nor can it account for the fact that in spite of hope such as we find expressed in Acts 1:6, the early church neither awaited whatever the future should hold with an abandonment of present responsibilities, nor did it die out in its "natural way," as other disillusioned enthusiastic movements did.⁵

Aune sets out "to demonstrate the weaknesses inherent in any theory that regards the delay of the Parousia as a causal factor in the theological transformation of early Christianity."⁶ He points out that for Schweitzer's theory of the inherently eschatological character of early Christianity, any de-eschatologisation, that is, the rethinking necessitated by the "failure" of the Parousia to eventuate following the death of Jesus, meant the abandonment of its original essence; a radical move which Schweitzer did not hesitate to make. Schweitzer saw the "Hellenisation" of Christianity as the counterpart to the abandonment of its earlier eschatological character and necessitated by the failure of earlier hopes for an imminent Parousia. Nartin Werner and Fritz Buri applied Schweitzer's theory to the history of Christian theology.⁷ Pinnock notes that Schweitzer's "consistent eschatology" arbitrarily focuses on the chronology of eschatology, that is, the alleged delay of the Parousia, rather than the person and work of Christ, thereby distorting and misreading it.⁸

C H Dodd's view was that Jesus had de-eschatologised the Jewish hope by teaching a realised eschatology, but that the views of Jesus were themselves re-eschatologised by his followers. The problem for Dodd then is how the Parousia became an integral feature of early Christianity.⁹ This re-eschatologisation is found in the Synoptic Gospels, Acts, the Pauline letters and the Revelation of John, while the original

⁵ A L Moore. **The Parousia in the New Testament**, p. 48.

⁶ David E Aune. "The significance of the delay of the Parousia for early Christianity." In: **Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation. Studies in honour of Merrill C Tenney**. Gerald F Hawthorne, ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, p. 88.

⁷ David E Aune. "The significance of the delay of the Parousia for early Christianity." In: **Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation**, pp. 88-89.

⁸ C H Pinnock. "The structure of Pauline eschatology." *Evangelical Quarterly* 37 (1965) 10.

⁹ David E Aune. "The significance of the delay of the Parousia for early Christianity." In: **Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation**, p. 89.

realised eschatology of Jesus himself is still to be found in the Gospel of John and Hebrews. Since Dodd sees the teachings of Jesus as normative for theology, what he sees as a “re-eschatologisation” is an aberration which must be corrected.¹⁰

Since Bultmann thought the real essence of Christianity lay not in its temporal dimension but in its existential dimension, the process of de-eschatologisation inherent in the “Hellenisation” of Christianity does not mean a radical change of its character. He considers Paul to have engaged in the process of de-eschatologisation in which the temporal features of eschatology were abandoned while the existential dimension was retained. For Bultmann the delay of the Parousia was the single necessary factor (although a negative one) for the subsequent development of Christianity, as he does not present any positive causes for such development.¹¹ The “existential” dimension is the exhortation to the believers to live expectantly, not that the parousia will come, but because this is the attitude with which we are to live. Bultmann explicitly denies that there will be any resurrection or a parousia. But Aune argues that the general thrust of the parables which “exhort the hearers to vigilance in view of the impending crisis” (e.g. Matthew 18:43-51 and 25:14-30) includes an integral imminent eschatological expectation,¹² but there are no signs of a lessening of the expectation as a result of the delay of the Parousia. Aune also rejects the idea that the exhortations to vigilance “are a kind of ‘whistling in the dark’ that reflects disappointment over the non-occurrence of the Parousia”. In addition, the lack of specificity as to the date of the Parousia make it impossible for its non-occurrence to become a critical problem in early Christianity.¹³

In addition to a number of Biblical texts (Luke 12:42-46 = Matthew 24:45-51, 2 Peter 3:1-10, James 5:8ff, Hebrews 10:36-39), Aune lists other early Christian documents in which the problem of the delay of the Parousia occurs. He indicates his amazement at

¹⁰ David E Aune. “The significance of the delay of the Parousia for early Christianity.” In: **Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation**, p. 90.

¹¹ David E Aune. “The significance of the delay of the Parousia for early Christianity.” In: **Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation**, pp. 91-92.

¹² Cf. the comment by Thiselton about the views of D O Via. **The parables. Their literary and existential dimension**. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967, 126-128, that “Waiting is not to be a time when nothing happens and nobody comes. For the maidens in the parable the significance of ‘waiting’ is that the length of time before the crisis is *not under their control*. Hence in this way the uncertainty and imminence of the expected event gives content and meaning to the present.” A C Thiselton. “The Parousia in modern theology, some questions and comments.” *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976) 39.

¹³ David E Aune. “The significance of the delay of the Parousia for early Christianity.” In: **Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation**, p. 98.

the relative infrequency of the “problem” in light of modern views that early Christianity was fundamentally shaped by disappointment caused by the delay. Aune lists only 1 Clement 23.3, 2 Clement 11-12, the Ascension of Isaiah 3:21-30, and The Pastor of Hermas 3.8.9.¹⁴ He concludes that this infrequency, as well as the competing interpretation of these texts which indicates they are not necessarily responding to the problem of the delay, indicate how unimportant this problem really was, and that the reconstructions of early Christianity built on the presupposition of the centrality of the problem appear less viable.¹⁵

C H Talbert is of the opinion that there is no evidence for serious Christian disturbance caused by the delay of the parousia.¹⁶ He has concluded that those who deny the Parousia in 2 Peter 3:4 are sectarian gnostics, who take this position not because of the delay in the Parousia, but because they deny the Parousia as a result of a spiritualised eschatology that is opposed to an actual future event of an historical kind. Their mythologising exegesis of the OT and Paul’s letters leads them to the view that salvation is entirely present.¹⁷ Talbert thinks that the problem of the delay of the parousia and eschatology in general can only be properly treated in the context of the problem to which 2 Peter is addressed, i.e. gnosticising realized eschatology which rejects a future parousia.¹⁸ Talbert concludes that the root of the problem in 2 Peter 3:4 is not the delay of the parousia but a denial of a future judgement. The gnosticising heresy against which the letter is addressed identifies the resurrection with their enlightenment, that is, it is totally spiritualised.¹⁹ As a result, according to Talbert this text cannot be used to demonstrate that the delay of the Parousia caused a crisis in early Christianity. He demonstrates that the same problem and solution is found in 1 Clement 23.3 and the letter of Polycarp to the Philippians 7.²⁰

Aune concludes with Talbert that some of the other texts, said to reflect the crisis of the delay, are directed against aberrant forms of Christianity that denied an

¹⁴ David E Aune. “The significance of the delay of the Parousia for early Christianity.” In: **Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation**, p. 98.

¹⁵ David E Aune. “The significance of the delay of the Parousia for early Christianity.” In: **Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation**, p. 100.

¹⁶ C H Talbert. “2 Peter and the delay of the Parousia.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 20 (1966) 137.

¹⁷ C H Talbert. “2 Peter and the delay of the Parousia.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 20 (1966) 141.

¹⁸ C H Talbert. “2 Peter and the delay of the Parousia.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 20 (1966) 142.

¹⁹ C H Talbert. “2 Peter and the delay of the Parousia.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 20 (1966) 143.

²⁰ C H Talbert. “2 Peter and the delay of the Parousia.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 20 (1966) 144.

eschatological expectation as such (1 Clement 23.3, 2 Clement 11-12, Ascension of Isaiah 3:21-30).²¹ As for other Patristic writers, Barnard points out that Justin Martyr has a vivid belief in the second Advent of Christ, “yet it is remarkable how little the delay in the Parousia seems to have worried him.”²²

Cullmann holds that in spite of the delay of the Parousia, this did not diminish the eschatological expectation of the early church, since it did not expect an imminent end in and of itself, but that it understood the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” which was present in the teaching of Jesus.²³ Cullmann also suggested that Paul changed his mind about the nearness of the parousia. Thus his “early” conviction (as found in 1 Thessalonians 4:15) that he would be alive at the parousia, is replaced, in 2 Corinthians 5:1ff, by the view that he may have to die before the parousia.²⁴ Ridderbos critiques this view and shows it to be untenable because of the unlikely supposition that Paul’s “earlier” view appears in 1 Corinthians 15, while his “later” view appears in 2 Corinthians 5, written within two years of each other, without any justification for his change of view. Ridderbos also suggests that the “early” view had thereby persisted for at least twenty years after his conversion, and that in that period many of the believers must have died. Thus the “we” of the passages in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 and 2 Corinthians 5:1 must refer to a general “we” rather than presupposing Paul’s self-inclusion.²⁵ This interpretation is found in Patristic literature.

Macarius says [Apocriticus 4.12] that when Paul refers to “we shall be snatched up” in 1 Thessalonians 4.16, he is not saying the resurrection would occur before he died, but identified his humanity with that of the whole race.²⁶

He goes on to speak about the resurrection. See how amazingly he has developed what we believe, taking the resurrection of the Lord as a pledge for our resurrection. For he caused all people to rise through his

²¹ David E Aune. “The significance of the delay of the Parousia for early Christianity.” In: **Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation**, p. 100.

²² L W Barnard. “Justin Martyr’s eschatology.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 19 (1965) 86f.

²³ David E Aune. “The significance of the delay of the Parousia for early Christianity.” In: **Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation**, p. 93.

²⁴ O Cullmann. **Christ and Time**. London: S.C.M., 1962, p. 88.

²⁵ H Ridderbos. **Paul: An outline of his theology**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, p. 492.

²⁶ T W Crafer. “Macarius Magnes, a neglected apologist.” *Journal of Theological Studies* 8 (1907) 568.

own flesh. Hence he is called the first-begotten from the dead. He says, *By the word of the Lord*, using the expression so that they will be confident about what is revealed. *Because we who live who remain until the coming of the Lord*. He says this not because he himself remained until the time of the resurrection, but since he was talking about the living and he himself was alive. In saying this he used the ordinary manner of speech, *we who are alive*. When he says this he adds, *those who remain*, since if he says this, *while I am alive*, how does he say elsewhere that we shall all rise? For if it comes upon him when he is alive, how is he raised? So he says, *we who are alive*, in the sense I have just given. We shall not precede those who are asleep. *Because the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a command, with the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God*. And he explains how he will not precede (them) as follows: *Because the Lord himself with a command*. What command? The command of resurrection, instead of saying, commanding to rise. *With the voice of an archangel*, which he also calls the trumpet of God, because it happens at the command of God. The parable in the Gospel also points to this, for there was a cry in the middle of the night: *Come out to meet the bridegroom*.²⁷

Aune also points out that there is “no demonstrable causal relationship between the oscillating functional significance of the Parousia expectation” and the developments in the life and thought of early Christianity.²⁸ He further mentions that Christianity does not see salvation as something which comes solely in the future, but that it is possessed here and now, although there is a fullness and completion to the process of salvation which will not be realised until the Parousia, when the righteous are rewarded and the wicked judged. Thus since at no time was the expectation of salvation wholly future, the delay in the manifestation of that future salvation did not cause a crisis of belief. That is, the believers had an experience of salvation in the present, and anticipated a consummation to that salvation at the Parousia.²⁹ That

²⁷ John of Damascus. *On 1 Thessalonians* 4:12-14. PG 95, 913-916.

²⁸ David E Aune. “The significance of the delay of the Parousia for early Christianity.” In: **Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation**, p. 101.

²⁹ David E Aune. “The significance of the delay of the Parousia for early Christianity.” In: **Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation**, pp. 104-105.

consummation was certain, although the timing was not, and so impatience at the “delay” may have caused disappointment. This however is in no way comparable to disillusionment because of non-fulfillment of the promise, and certainly not the cause of a crisis of faith which produced an impetus to radically alter the character of Christianity. Aune contends that early Christianity subsequent to the completion of the N.T. began to place more emphasis on personal eschatology, shaped by Hellenistic influences, which directed attention away from the Hebraic expectation of the redemption of the community at the Parousia when all would experience fullness of salvation. The thought of the church began to move steadily towards an immediate experience of salvation upon death, with a growing belief in the immortality of the soul. The expectation of the Parousia, as an historical eschatological event at which time all would take part in the resurrection of the dead, was subsumed and overshadowed by this new development, and thus the continued delay of the Parousia became even less of a problem. With the almost complete replacement of millennialism with an immediate individualistic eschatology, the expectation of the Parousia was functionally replaced and no longer served its original purpose in the structure of Christian belief.³⁰

The more general suggestion that Paul’s own thought developed radically through his years of missionary work as seen in his epistles has been questioned and seriously weakened by Dibelius, who argues that the 15 or so years between his conversion and the commencement of his missionary work are more likely to include radical changes in his views than the last 15 years of his life when engaged in proclaiming Christ to the world.

Except for changes in the emphasis of certain particular doctrines, all the attempts of scholars to distinguish between a doctrinal system that was as yet undeveloped - in the earliest letters that we have (to Thessalonica) - and that of the four principal letters... have broken down.³¹

In response to the suggestion that there is a major or even radical development in Paul’s thought, Moore comments:

³⁰ David E Aune. “The significance of the delay of the Parousia for early Christianity.” In: **Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation**, pp. 108-109.

³¹ M Dibelius. **Paul**. London, 1953, p. 60. Cited in: A L Moore. **The Parousia in the New Testament**. Leiden: E J Brill, 1966, p. 61, n. 4.

...beneath the surface of Paul's letters, which changes according to the needs and circumstances being addressed, there is a constant and consistent eschatological framework in which the past, dominated by the Cross and Resurrection, the present, dominated by the Spirit, and the future, dominated by the Parousia, all have their necessary place.³²

Thus it is perfectly permissible, if not mandatory, to consider the legacy of Paul's writings as presenting a coherent, consistent and continuing eschatology, while acknowledging that there is within that eschatology considerable variety of nuance, emphasis and application according to the needs of his hearers. There is also a development, deepening and enriching of his eschatological perspective as that which was latent or only implicit in his earlier letters is unfolded and explored as its significance became apparent over the years of his missionary work.

Pinnock expresses the view that the development in Paul's eschatology evident between the writing of his first and second letters to the Corinthians (as we have them) is not a sign of a change of mind but "the mark of a maturing mind, the shift from excitement to serenity, and from restlessness to calm hope."³³ He also suggests that the "thief in the night" image in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 precludes any attempt to calculate the time,³⁴ and therefore any crisis because of the "delay" can only be because of an illegitimate attempt to set a date, an attempt which can only lead to failure and disappointment. Pinnock suggests that it is the genius of Paul's eschatology that he denies the Parousia can be dated, so that the challenge of the nearness of the Parousia can always be sustained.³⁵ Pinnock cites the view of Geerhardus Vos that the notion of nearness belongs to all genuine eschatology.³⁶ Pinnock summarises the views of W L Knox that there is a discernable movement in Paul's teaching about the resurrection, from primitive Jewish notions (1 Thess. 4:13-18) to a more refined spiritualised concept (1 Corinthians 15:35-57), and then to a Hellenistic recasting of the idea (2 Corinthians 5:1-10).³⁷ However Ellis has dismissed

³² A L Moore. **The Parousia in the New Testament**, p. 61.

³³ C H Pinnock. "The structure of Pauline eschatology." *Evangelical Quarterly* 37 (1965) 13.

³⁴ C H Pinnock. "The structure of Pauline eschatology." *Evangelical Quarterly* 37 (1965) 17.

³⁵ C H Pinnock. "The structure of Pauline eschatology." *Evangelical Quarterly* 37 (1965) 17.

³⁶ C H Pinnock. "The structure of Pauline eschatology." *Evangelical Quarterly* 37 (1965) 17, citing G Vos. **Pauline Eschatology**, pp. 32f.

³⁷ C H Pinnock. "The structure of Pauline eschatology." *Evangelical Quarterly* 37 (1965) 17-18, citing W L Knox. **St. Paul and the church of the Gentiles**. Cambridge, 1939.

this view with the contention that 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 contains to very un-Hellenistic notions, that of the Spirit (v. 5) and the judgement (v. 10).³⁸

While Paul, for example, is able to view the Parousia hope almost exclusively in terms of its salvific function in one context (1 Thess 4:13-18), he can also articulate the expectation of the Parousia almost exclusively in terms of its juridical function (2 Thess 1:5-10). This juridical view of the Parousia was important in situations wherein Christians were experiencing the hostility of their pagan neighbours or of the state, since it assured them that those who caused their suffering would in turn experience suffering and punishment at the hands of the coming Judge.³⁹

This expectation of judgement on those who persecuted them was not a desire for revenge (or should not have been) on the part of the Christians, but rather a desire to see God vindicate his name through recompensing those who persecuted his own people with the appropriate punishment.

Charles Buck has developed a theory of the development of Paul's theology which he sees in three quite distinct and dateable stages: an early stage, represented by 1-2 Thessalonians, the middle, found in 1-2 Corinthians, Romans and Galatians, and a late stage which includes Philippians, Colossians, Philemon and Ephesians. Buck bases his theory on a conjectured changing eschatological outlook in Paul's letters.⁴⁰ According to Drane, Buck takes his initial starting point, that 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians 1-9 and Romans were written in that order and within about eight months, from an historical argument based on the references to the collection for the Jerusalem church.⁴¹ Buck bases his argument concerning Paul's developing eschatology on the assumption that during his first visit to Corinth he had taught an imminent parousia, and the consequent irrelevance of ethical teaching. However since there was an indefinite delay of the parousia, during which time some of the converts had died, and so Paul had to explain his eschatology in greater detail in 1 Corinthians 15. Buck then compares this passage with 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 where he sees a special resurrection of Christians only mentioned, while in 1 Corinthians 15 he mentions a

³⁸ E E Ellis. "2 Corinthians 5:1-10 in Pauline eschatology." *New Testament Studies* 6 (1959-60) 211-224.

³⁹ David E Aune. "The significance of the delay of the Parousia for early Christianity." In: **Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation**, p. 107.

⁴⁰ J W Drane. "Theological diversity in the letters of St. Paul." *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976) 4. C Buck. **Saint Paul: a study in the development of his thought**. New York, 1969.

⁴¹ J W Drane. "Theological diversity in the letters of St. Paul." *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976) 5.

general resurrection of all the dead, which he had not supposedly mentioned to the Corinthians.⁴² Against this view of Bucks, it is to be noted that Paul first visited Corinth immediately after his visit to Athens (Acts 17) where he had not only mentioned the resurrection of Christ, but also the judgement of all the dead, which presumably comes after a general resurrection. He does not mention the general resurrection, but states that the proof that there will be a judgement is that Christ has been raised from the dead. The logic of this would be that therefore a resurrection was envisaged, since it was possible and had been inaugurated in Christ, and as a result there would be no escape from God's judgement day.

Buck argues that 1 Corinthians 15 modifies 1 Thessalonians, which presents an imminent expectation of Christ's return, in order to take account of the fact that some Christians had already died. Buck sees the following development in Paul's thought:

1. Paul's original conviction was that the parousia was imminent, and all Christians will live to see it.⁴³
2. The Christian dead will be raised at the parousia (1 Thessalonians and the conjectured contents of a previous letter to the Corinthians).
3. The dead will be raised with bodies of spirit, and the living will likewise be changed (1 Corinthians 15).
4. In 1 Corinthians 15 the change of flesh to spirit is instantaneous; in 2 Corinthians (3:17f, 5:1-4, 4:16ff) it is gradual, starting at conversion and continuing until final resurrection.⁴⁴

Buck goes on to say that in 1 Corinthians (5:3-5, 11:27ff) death is still exceptional and a punishment for sin, while in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 death is no longer a judgement but "the climax of the process by which [the Christian] has been transformed from flesh to spirit," something that has already happened so that the Christian is even now a new creation.⁴⁵ With respect to Buck's contention that there is a line of development between 2 Corinthians 5:14, Galatians 2:20 and Romans 6:4, Drane argues that this is

⁴² J W Drane. "Theological diversity in the letters of St. Paul." *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976) 6.

⁴³ J W Drane points out that there is no evidence for such a view in Paul. "Theological diversity in the letters of St. Paul." *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976) 14.

⁴⁴ J W Drane. "Theological diversity in the letters of St. Paul." *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976) 7.

⁴⁵ J W Drane. "Theological diversity in the letters of St. Paul." *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976) 7.

obvious only if Buck's theory is taken as a basic presupposition. Drane counters that the occurrence of the same theme in three places "suggests nothing more profound than the observation that it must have been an important element in Pauline theology."⁴⁶ In any case, presupposing the truth of the theory one is attempting to demonstrate in order to show the validity of the exegesis on which the theory is supposedly based is an unacceptable procedure.⁴⁷ This is what Buck is attempting to do: accept the temporal sequence of letters on the basis of the development in Paul's theology, and then "prove" that because there is an obvious development in the letters in a temporally linear way, then Paul's theology "developed" as the theory proposes. Drane comments that

Buck seems to assume that Paul can be expected to write all that he believes in every epistle, and that if something is not stated that means he did not believe it at the time of writing. We have noticed, for example, the contrast between Paul's treatment of the Law as between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, a distinction that could be explained in several ways. The theory that Paul's thought was undergoing some form of radical development is one possible explanation, but there are others. Buck always chooses the development theory as the correct one.⁴⁸

There seems to be an implicit evolutionistic approach to Paul's thought which is the basis for the theory, since Buck presupposes development is taking place, as opposed to other possible solutions which are not inherently developmental. Drane rejects Buck's contention of a development in Paul's thought which is based on the perceived inconsistencies in his letters, and states:

It is clear that if we are dealing with a total body of thought that we call "Pauline theology," there is no real difficulty in seeing how the various strands of Paul's teaching can hang together - and in that context it becomes clear that the diversity of expression traceable in the individual letters is directly related to the diversity of the

⁴⁶ J W Drane. "Theological diversity in the letters of St. Paul." *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976) 11.

⁴⁷ Thiselton comments that this is the flaw in the theory of Albert Schweitzer and Martin Werner: "...the detailed arguments of Schweitzer and Werner can only be sustained if every part of the New Testament is radically re-interpreted from the point of view of a theological scheme which presupposes its own criteria of authenticity and dating." A C Thiselton. "The Parousia in modern theology, some questions and comments." *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976) 35.

⁴⁸ J W Drane. "Theological diversity in the letters of St. Paul." *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976) 14.

opponents against whom Paul was writing... To this extent we could say that the expression of Paul's theology was moulded by the events of his own life and ministry. But that is not saying much more than that Paul was a wise strategist, who expressed himself in terms that were relevant to whatever situations he found himself in, and who was willing to learn from his mistakes. This kind of theological diversity certainly does not presuppose any formal system of development in Paul's thinking, and in this respect the hypothesis I have suggested is altogether different from that put forward explicitly by Buck, and accepted implicitly by a large number of other New Testament scholars.⁴⁹

Drane makes the perceptive comment that Buck has interpreted Paul as if he were an academic scholar publishing a series of treatises, in which a development of thought can be perceived. The context and situation in which and into which Paul was writing is as good as ignored. Drane states, correctly in my view, that Paul's letters cannot be understood like this.

One of the disturbing things about this whole theory is that it seems to have been constructed quite independently of any appreciation of the real situations in which Paul found himself. If we visualize Paul under the guise of a twentieth century academic writing monographs on theology, then the variations in his expression may well be thought to represent some kind of development in his thought. But if we see him as a pastor dealing on a more or less *ad hoc* basis with the problems of Christian living as and when they arose, the picture we get of him is quite different.⁵⁰

A similar view is expressed by Smalley in his treatment of the problem of the delay of the parousia, based on his analysis of the theme of the parousia in Paul's epistles.

I want to suggest that instead of a radical departure from Paul's earlier view of the parousia, the delay of which gave rise to hasty revisions, we are confronted in the Pauline epistles with a homogeneous eschatological outlook, in which Paul's own background and intellect, as well as the differing milieux and problems of his readers, cause more or less the same thing to be said in different ways. The

⁴⁹ J W Drane. "Theological diversity in the letters of St. Paul." *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976) 13.

⁵⁰ J W Drane. "Theological diversity in the letters of St. Paul." *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976) 15.

differences of eschatological *genre*, in fact, are apparent rather than real.⁵¹

Paul uses the term “mystery” to indicate that what he is about to say is something which was previously hidden but has now been revealed by God. However Mearns argues that when Paul uses this term in 1 Corinthians 15:51 and 1 Thessalonians 4:14, he is referring to a new teaching which he has only just received and which he has not before communicated.⁵² Mearns bases his interpretation on John Hurd’s method of reconstructing from 1 Corinthians the points raised by the Corinthians in their message to Paul in reply to his “previous letter” to them. From this he reconstructs the points made in that letter, and then reaches behind that letter to the original teaching given by Paul to the Corinthians during his missionary journey.⁵³ On the basis of this highly speculative methodology, Mearns adopts the following schema of Paul’s teaching (with some modification from Hurd’s interpretation of the original teaching of Paul on his mission).

The founding mission: Paul taught that the end had come, that believers had entered the kingdom, and that the communion of the body and blood of the Lord kept reminding them that they were living in the age of the Messiah’s banquet.

The previous letter: Paul taught the Corinthians not to mourn for those who had died, since at the return of Christ they would be raised and enter the kingdom.

The Corinthians’ message: they found this new doctrine disconcerting, and they also repudiated belief in a bodily fleshly resurrection as such an idea was gross and unspiritual.

⁵¹ S S Smalley. “The delay of the parousia.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83 (1964) 50.

⁵² C L Mearns. “Early eschatological development in Paul: the evidence of 1 Corinthians.” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 22 (1984) 21-22.

⁵³ C L Mearns. “Early eschatological development in Paul: the evidence of 1 Corinthians.” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 22 (1984) 22. Mearns also postulates the existence of a “previous letter” to the Thessalonians in which he first gives evidence of his change of views. The existing 1 Thessalonians is then a defence of his change of position, with respect to what he had taught while on his missionary journey. “Early eschatological development in Paul: the evidence of 1 and 2 Thessalonians.” *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981) 145. The attempt to explain Paul’s thought, and more critically the development of his thought, from the postulated existence and contents of non-extant writings is speculative in the extreme.

1 Corinthians: Paul insisted on the resurrection, but assured the Corinthians it would be spiritual not fleshly.⁵⁴

Such a highly speculative reconstruction of Paul's teaching cannot be used to support any definitive argument for the development of his thought. In addition, the interpretation of his teaching on the resurrection in the "previous letter" and 1 Corinthians presupposes a dualism between flesh and spirit which is in no way the best understanding of his thought.⁵⁵ It is more likely that the Corinthians misunderstood, or distorted, what Paul had taught them on his visit and in his "previous letter" (although the content of the latter can never be proven), than that Paul's thought underwent major revision which he then had to justify to the Corinthians who were still living according to his earlier teaching.

Kreitzer considers that Mearns's argument is not convincing because he has not attempted to prove that Paul's original eschatological teaching did not include belief in the future resurrection of the body, even though he assumes this to have been the case. Mearns also assumes that the development of eschatology arises from the interaction of two essentially incompatible views, that eschatology is fully and entirely realized, and that eschatology is imminent. The incompatibility between these two views is the cause of the controversy between Paul and the Thessalonians. Mearns further assumes that the integration of these two themes in Paul's thought took place only through his controversy with the Thessalonians, rather than that these two themes were integrated from the beginning, but that the Thessalonians did not recognise the interconnection.⁵⁶

Kreitzer also confesses amazement that we are expected by Mearns to believe that in his first fifteen years of ministry Paul had never had to deal with the problem of Christians dying before the return of Christ, and that he had had little or no contact with Christians who had died. This assumption of Mearns' is described by Kreitzer as a naive assumption which stretches the imagination, a shallow handling of the

⁵⁴ C L Mearns. "Early eschatological development in Paul: the evidence of 1 Corinthians." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 22 (1984) 22.

⁵⁵ See H Ridderbos. **Paul: An outline of his theology**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, pp. 66-67. N A Waaning. **Onderzoek naar het gebruik van *pneuma* bij Paulus**. Amsterdam: Bakker, 1939.

⁵⁶ L J Kreitzer. **Jesus and God in Paul's eschatology**. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement* 19. Sheffield: J.S.O.T. Press, 1987, p. 178.

question of the death of believers.⁵⁷ Kreitzer mentions the study of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 by Joseph PLevnik, whom he considers has demonstrated that Paul's original eschatological teaching to the Thessalonians did include the idea of the resurrection of the dead.⁵⁸ Kreitzer further cites work by J Gillman who argues for a stronger continuity between 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 1 Corinthians 15 than Mearns allows for. Gillman sees the development in Paul's eschatology not from one conception to another but from the implicit (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18) to the explicit (1 Corinthians 15).⁵⁹

With regard to the unity of the Gospels, which has been challenged by many scholars, especially Bultmann and his followers, and the resulting antitheses arising from this hermeneutical method, Moore makes an important comment which applies as much to the analysis of Paul's thought as to other parts of the Old and New Testaments:

In this way the New Testament is subjected to severe fragmentation and any unity of witness within the early Church is discountenanced. Yet the profession of faith in the person of Jesus Christ, the acceptance of the "tradition," involved the several communities, whatever their differences, in "one body, and one spirit... one hope of ... calling: one Lord, one faith, one baptism..." (Ephesians 4:4). Whether this unity of faith involved also a unity of witness or not, the *possibility* of such unity ought not to be excluded by any method of interpreting the several elements in the New Testament.⁶⁰

This criticism is valid, as so often the presupposition that there is a unity of conception, an agreement in perspective, is excluded from consideration in exegesis and theology, on the basis not of exegetical considerations, but because of a competing set of presuppositions. It would appear then in the light of all this evidence that to presuppose an internal constancy and consistency in Paul's eschatology, throughout its various permutations and articulations, is not only legitimate, but

⁵⁷ L J Kreitzer. **Jesus and God in Paul's eschatology**, p. 178.

⁵⁸ L J Kreitzer. **Jesus and God in Paul's eschatology**, p. 180, citing J Plevnik. "The taking up of the faithful and the resurrection of the dead in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984) 274-283.

⁵⁹ L J Kreitzer. **Jesus and God in Paul's eschatology**, p. 251, n. 34, citing J Gillmann. "Signals of transformation in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985) 263-281.

⁶⁰ A L Moore. **The Parousia in the New Testament**, p. 71.

possibly indispensable to an accurate assessment of his thought. The assumptions which lie behind the postulation of a radical development in his thought, which is based on a shift from an imminent parousia to a more “mature” reflection on eschatology, have been shown to be highly dubious if not totally unsupportable. There can therefore be no *prima facie* rejection of an interpretation of Paul which presupposes continuity and consistency of eschatological conceptions throughout his writings. It is this position, for which the evidence appears to be strongest, and which is based on more defensible assumptions, which is consequently adopted in this study.

The number of documents from early Christianity covered in the survey of implicit evidence of the delay of the Parousia is a reflection of the way in which this issue has dominated interpretation of the New Testament. Nevertheless one should recognise that such an approach to these documents is not universally accepted. Study of Luke/Acts has not been unanimous in affirming that the dominant concern was the delay of the Parousia, and - what is more - the periodization of history, which we find in these documents, has been considered by other commentators as typical of the New Testament as a whole. Certainly other explanations may be offered of those differences which exist between Luke and Mark, particularly in Luke 21:5ff., which has been regarded as an alternative form of the eschatological discourse rather than a rewriting of it by Luke. What is evident in Luke/Acts (and for that matter the Pastorals also) is the concern to come to terms with the world and present a view of the Christian religion which will enable it to find acceptance by society at large. The need to do this and to tell the story of its origin may in part indicate the perspective of one who now feels that an accommodation is needed with the world, because of the problem of having to accept continued existence in it. As such we would be talking about subtle changes in the world view of the Christians rather than a conscious attempt to answer the problem of the delay of the Parousia.⁶¹

That there was a diminution in the hope of the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth and the emphasis on the transcendent realm as the goal of the Christian soul can be seen from the evidence of the early Christian texts [Rowland cites Eusebius’ comments on Papias and Cerinthus]. But to speak of the move of eschatology to the margin does not necessarily mean that the delay of the Parousia was a problem. It is likely that the failure to see the realization at an early date of the hopes for the coming

⁶¹ Christopher Rowland. **Christian Origins. An account of the setting and character of the most important Messianic sect of Judaism.** London: S.P.C.K., 1985, pp. 291-292.

of the kingdom of God would have caused some embarrassment, but we must beware that we do not read into the texts an assumption that it was the non-appearance of Christ which necessarily lead to a radical rethinking of early Christian thought, away from eschatology to other doctrinal concerns.⁶²

⁶² Christopher Rowland. **Christian Origins**, p. 291 (emphasis in the original).