

Is the apostle John still alive?

During the forty days Jesus spent with His disciples after His resurrection and before His ascension, Jesus restored the apostle Peter with a series of three “do you love me?” questions in John 21:15-17. Jesus then predicted Peter’s eventual death by crucifixion (John 21:18-19). Peter, seeing “the disciple whom Jesus loved” nearby, asked Jesus, “Lord, what about him?” (John 21:20-21).

Jesus responded to Peter by saying, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me” (John 21:22). John follows that up with an explanation of how Jesus’ statement gave rise to an unwarranted assumption among some believers: “Because of this, the rumor spread among the believers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, ‘If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?’” (John 21:23).

Throughout Christian history, rumors have persisted that John the apostle is still alive and that he will remain alive until Jesus returns. Of course, that would make the apostle John approximately 2,000 years old by now. Still, there are legends that John is immortal and has been roaming the world for two millennia. The LDS Church teaches that John is still alive and ministering on earth until Jesus’ return (Doctrines and Covenants 7:1-4). Other groups entertain the possibility of John’s continuing presence on earth, without teaching it as official doctrine. One rather odd legend is that John is being held as a prisoner by the Roman Catholic Church beneath Vatican City.

The problem is that these legends miss the clear point of what Jesus was saying to Peter in John 21. Jesus had just told Peter how Peter was going to die. Peter responded with, “What about John?” Jesus used hyperbole, extreme exaggeration, to make a point: “If I

want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?” Jesus essentially told Peter, “Don’t worry about John. His death is none of your business. Your job is to follow Me.”

Then, to clarify the matter even further, John, the author of the Gospel of John, added his explanatory note. John himself did not believe Jesus was saying that he would live until the second coming. John explicitly states, “Jesus did not say that he would not die” (John 21:23, emphasis added). It is odd that John’s own clarification of what Jesus did not say is insufficient for some.

The apostle John is not still alive today. While it is likely that John outlived the other apostles, and the circumstances of John’s death are unknown, there is no biblical reason to believe the apostle John is still alive. When John wrote his Gospel, he tried to quash the rumors of his immortality. John’s own clarification of what Jesus said was intentionally designed to persuade his readers to reject the idea that he would not see death.