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The Second Coming of Christ in Modern Theology

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The SECOND COMING of CHRIST in

I BELIEVE in God the Father Almighty . . . and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord. . . . He ascended into heaven; and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead." In words similar to these of the Apostles' Creed, Christians of all lands have confessed their hope in the second coming of Christ for at least eighteen hundred years.

The fact that today in thousands of churches around the world these words continue to be repeated every time Christians meet in worship is testimony that this hope remains an essential, though sometimes neglected, tenet of Christian faith. This anomaly was dramatically demonstrated in 1954 at the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Evanston, Illinois, where the theme chosen for the assembly was "Christ—the Hope of the World." The word *hope* here implied the Christian hope of the second advent. But the varied reception given this theme at Evanston (reaction ran all the way from enthusiastic acceptance to disinterest, if not opposition) demonstrated clearly that Christians regard this subject from widely differing points of view.

Let us look briefly at some of the leading approaches to the question of the second coming of Christ as they are set forth currently in the writings of three of the world's leading theologians. These scholars champion sharply differing points of view on the second coming. Together they represent much of Protestant thought today.

CHARLES HAROLD DODD

One important interpretation of Christian eschatology (the doctrine of the "last things") was presented in 1935 by a Cambridge professor, C. H. Dodd, in his book *"The Parables of the Kingdom"*; this was followed the next year by another work, small in size but large in importance, *"The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development."* In these two books Dodd set forth a point of view that has come to be known as "realized eschatology." He stresses the present reality and dynamic of the kingdom. Though often well-nigh invisible, the kingdom of God nevertheless is present and at work in the world. Thus Dodd sees the Messianic kingdom as having come in the person and the event

of Jesus Christ. The "end of the world" is the end of the old world of sin and darkness, an end which was accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and is now extended throughout the world by the church.

Those elements in the New Testament that point to a historically future end of the world, a cataclysmic inbreaking of the kingdom, an apocalyptic second coming, Dodd explains by an interesting analysis of the New Testament documents. He points out that in the sermons preached by the apostles in the early chapters of the Book of Acts, little is said of the second coming. Christ had died, risen, and ascended to the right hand of God, and the Holy Spirit had been poured out. The second coming was merely the completion of these events and would occur at any moment.

Since these sermons doubtless represent the preaching of the apostles soon after the crucifixion, whereas the Gospels were written a number of decades later, Dodd believes that the apostolic preaching in Acts represents a more accurate view of the most primitive Christian faith. He explains that anticipation of the end of the world at a future time, as expressed in the Gospels, reflects a change in Christian belief under the influence of Jewish apocalyptic expectations, a change that became dominant in Christianity a generation after the cross.

Thus for Dodd the idea of a second coming in the future, as a historical event, does not represent the view of Jesus or of the earliest Christians. He lays emphasis rather on the fulfilment of all that is implied by the "last things" in Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Through the Spirit, Christ comes again; by virtue of His resurrection the believer is resurrected to newness of life. Thus the "last things" are already realized in Christ and His church.

Dodd's "realized eschatology" has found many adherents among Protestant theologians. Perhaps its greatest weakness is that it seems to write off as a secondary development in Christianity the expectation of a future consummation that was such a dominant element both in the Judaism contemporary with Jesus and in the minds of the writers of the New Testament. That Jesus and His immediate disciples were com-

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Modern Theology

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pletely devoid of such a perspective, which was so prominent in their environment, is difficult for us to believe. At the same time, Dodd has certainly made a lasting contribution to New Testament study by his emphasis on the fact that in an important sense, the kingdom of God *has* come in Jesus Christ. The Christian does receive eternal life now, and it is the resurrection of Christ that makes this possible.

RUDOLPH BULTMANN

No discussion of current viewpoints on eschatology can omit the name of Rudolph Bultmann, professor emeritus at the University of Marburg, Germany. Bultmann feels that it is simply impossible for the truly modern man—the man who lives in the twentieth-century world of scientific knowledge and achievement—any longer seriously to believe in the supernatural. Bultmann sees spatial concepts of heaven as a place “above” the earth, to which Christ could “ascend,” and from which He will “descend” in a second coming, as part of the first-century world view. Such a world view, he feels, cannot be taken seriously in any literal sense.

As far as the second coming of Christ, so eagerly expected by the early church, is concerned, Bultmann points out that it simply did not occur; for him this is further evidence that it was part and parcel of a concept of the universe that is no longer tenable. All this Bultmann describes as “myth.” For him, however, myth is much more than simply fairy tale. Rather, it is the use of a supernaturalistic and unrealistic view of the universe to express abiding truths regarding man’s understanding of himself. For the very reason that myth expresses these understandings, it is of extreme importance for Bultmann; but this importance lies not in the myth for its own sake, but in the understanding it conveys.

Thus, to be of real value for man today, the myth must be “demythologized”; its supernatural element

must be discarded, and from it must be distilled that which is relevant to man in his existential situation. In other words, modern man must look beyond the myth to that which the myth, rightly understood, has to say to him about his current predicament and its solution. Bultmann has set these views forth in a number of publications, among which may be mentioned *“Kerygma and Myth”* (edited by H. W. Bartsch, London, 1953) and *“The Presence of Eternity: History and Eschatology”* (New York, 1957).

According to Bultmann’s view, then, there can be no such thing as an expectation of a second coming of Christ within the framework of history. A literal understanding of the second advent belongs to the mythological world view of ancient times. But when demythologized, this ancient expectation has an important meaning for modern man. Bultmann is keenly conscious of the predicament in which humanity today finds itself—man is driven inexorably to make choices on which life and death hang; he is held responsible for these choices; and yet regardless of his choices, ultimately he cannot escape the grave. But a life lived under the pall of this dilemma is not real life. The key to authentic existence, for Bultmann, is found in what the myth of the resurrection and the second coming of Christ has to say to us. Here we are told that men can transcend the fear of death, that it no longer need be the conditioning factor of his existence, but that in “newness of life” he may enjoy authentic existence. In encountering the grace of God in Jesus Christ man comes into a new self-understanding which is “eternal life.”

Regardless of what one may think of Bultmann’s views on myth in the New Testament, he has done theology a distinct service by underlining the present significance of Biblical teaching regarding the last things. Eschatology is not simply a matter of “the sweet by-and-by,” but, to be truly significant for us, it must bear directly upon our day-to-day predicament.

OSCAR CULLMANN

Probably no Protestant scholar has been more sharply critical of Rudolf Bultmann—and at the same time more positively stimulating in his own thought on eschatology—than the French theologian Oscar Cullmann. His best expression to date on the subject is his book *“Christ and Time”* (1951). Cullmann’s special concern is to set forth the Biblical teaching regarding the nature of history, its mid-point at the cross, and its consummation in the second coming of Christ.

Cullmann points out that the Biblical view of time is sharply different from that of the Greek world in which the New Testament arose. For the Greeks, time was cyclical; they thought of history, in some sense, as repeating itself. As they watched the ebb and flow of nature, they concluded that similarly the history of this world was to be conceived as a sequence of cycles. Thus the Greek view of time suggests a circle rather than a line; and a circle has no end.

But the Biblical view of time, as Cullmann expounds it, is that history does move forward: The Bible knows a beginning and an end, and between these two termini is the cross of Christ with the resurrection, which constitutes the mid-point on the time-line and gives to the whole sequence its essential character as redemptive history. The stage of history before the cross is one of anticipation: “The entire redemptive history of the Old Testament tends toward the goal of the incarnation.”

With the triumph of Christ in the resurrection, the decisive battle in the struggle is won. That which characterizes the stage in which we live, between the resurrection and the second coming, is the tension between the fact that the crucial battle has already been won and the even more obvious fact that the struggle with evil still continues. This, Cullmann points out, is only natural. Jesus Himself expected an intermediary period between His death and the second coming (for instance, Mark 13:10).

This is the period of the Christian church with Christ as its King. It may be compared to the period in a war following the winning of the decisive battle, but before the final cessation of hostilities. The ene-



“Lift up the trumpet, and loud let it ring,
JESUS IS COMING AGAIN!”



my’s fate is sealed, but he fights on until he can fight no more. That the early church spoke of the second coming as if it were immediate may be understood from the common psychological reaction of people: Once it is clear what the outcome of a war will be, they expect the armistice earlier than it actually comes.

But by virtue of the fact that redemptive history is a true sequence of events with a beginning and a mid-point, it must also have an end. Cullmann’s point is that with the outcome settled at the resurrection, the future “Victory Day” is assured. On the basis of such passages as Mark 13:31; Revelation 21; and 2 Peter 3:13, Cullmann emphasizes that this consummation will see a victory not only in heaven but also upon earth.

The most important contribution of Cullmann’s thought is doubtless his demonstration that the Bible’s view of salvation is historical. He sees the plan of salvation not simply as an experience realized in the life of each individual Christian, but as a process worked out through various stages in history. From this he concludes that there is a *history* of redemption that will have its consummation in the second coming.

THE ADVENTIST VIEWPOINT

The point of view of Seventh-day Adventists on the second coming of Christ has much in common with that of Oscar Cullmann. They are convinced that the Bible, though not primarily a treatise on history in the modern technical sense, nonetheless proclaims a plan of salvation the outworking of which cannot be divorced from the history of mankind. Indeed, for the Adventist, the theme of a historical plan of salvation is a major factor in the unity of the Old and New Testaments. He takes with great seriousness the first verse of Holy Scripture, “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth” (Genesis 1:1), and sees this as the beginning of history. The covenant of God with Abraham and with Israel and His mighty acts in their behalf, which the Bible clearly sets in a historical context, further indicate that the plan of salvation is historical.

The event in which all salvation centres and from which the rest of its history derives its meaning is, of course, the revelation of God in His Son Jesus Christ, an event which occurred at a specific time and place, as the Gospels are concerned to point out (see Luke 2:1-5; 3:1-3). By the same token Adventists believe that the consummation of the plan of salvation in the second advent of Christ may also be expected to occur within human history. If by divine action history began when “God created the heaven and the earth,” and if, when seen from the standpoint of salvation, its uniquely significant event is the historical revelation of Jesus Christ, they feel that it is only logical to expect that its consummation in the second advent will also be historical.

Thus, with millions of other Christians, the Adventist believes that the assertion, as confessed for so many centuries in the Apostles’ Creed, that “Jesus Christ . . . suffered under Pontius Pilate”—a clearly historical event—gives basis to the hope that His second coming will also be truly historical: indeed, the end and consummation of the history of salvation.