

THE UNION SEMINARY REVIEW

VOL. XXVII.

JANUARY, 1916.

No. 2.

THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST.

(A Postmillennarian View.)

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR R. A. WEBB, D. D., LL. D.,

Presbyterian Theological Seminary of Kentucky, Louisville, Ky.

The last things in theology are really the first things in life. The woes of the European war are sending the world's mind back to eschatology. We were settling down into a naturalistic optimism. We were dreaming about some Utopia to be brought in by social programmes. The world to come was being relegated in favor of the world that now is.

Providence is driving us back to the old question, "After death, what?" What is to be the final *denouement* of this interesting world?

The Second Coming of Christ is, for Christian eschatology, the most momentous event which struggles in the bosom of the future. From the fall of man till the star stood still over Bethlehem, the First Coming of Christ was the sublimest object which loomed upon the horizon of human hope. Now all Christendom strains its eye for the return of him who once came, and has promised to come again.

About the fact and importance of the Second Coming, the Christian world is agreed. We all believe that Jesus will return

THE COMING OF CHRIST.

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR CHARLES R. ERDMAN, D. D.,

Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey.

The return of Christ is a *fundamental doctrine* of the Christian faith. It is embodied in hymns of hope; it forms the climax of the creeds; it is the sublime motive for evangelistic and missionary activity; and daily it is voiced in the inspired prayer: "Even so: Come, Lord Jesus."

It is peculiarly a *Scriptural doctrine*. It is not, on the one hand, a dream of ignorant fanatics, nor, on the other, a creation of speculative theologians; but it is a truth divinely revealed, and recorded in the Bible with marked clearness, emphasis and prominence.

Like the other great truths of revelation it is a *controverted doctrine*. The essential fact is held universally by all who admit the authority of Scripture; but as to certain incidental, although important, elements of the teaching, there is difference of opinion among even the most careful and reverent students. Any consideration of the theme demands, therefore, modesty, humility and abundant charity. According to the familiar view outlined in this paper, the Bible describes the "Second Coming of Christ" as *personal, glorious, imminent*.

I. HIS COMING WILL BE PERSONAL.

By *personal* is meant all that may be suggested by the words *visible, bodily, local*; and all that may be contrasted with that which is spiritual, providential, figurative. Of course, *the spiritual presence of Christ* is a blessed reality; one of the most comforting and inspiring of truths is the teaching that Christ does come to each believer, by His holy Spirit, and dwells within, and empowers for service and suffering and growth in grace; but this is to be held in harmony with the other blessed truth that Christ will some day literally appear again in bodily form,

and "we shall see Him" and shall then "be like Him," when "we see Him as He is."

Nor yet did that special manifestation of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost fulfil the promise of Christ's return. Subsequent to Pentecost, Peter urged the Jews to repent in order that Jesus, whom for a time "the heavens had received," might be "sent back again;" he wrote his epistles of comfort based upon the hope of a returning Lord, while Paul and the other inspired Apostles, long after Pentecost, emphasized the coming of Christ as the highest incentive for life and service.

According to the interpretation of others, Christ is said "to come" in various *providential events of history*, as notably in the destruction of Jerusalem. This tragedy of history is supposed by many to fulfil the prophecies spoken by Christ in His great discourse on the Mount of Olives, recorded in Matthew 24, and Mark 13, and Luke 21. When one combines these predictions, it becomes evident that the capture of the holy city by Titus was a real but only a partial fulfilment of the words of Christ. As in the case of so many Old Testament prophecies, the nearer event furnished the colors in which were depicted scenes and occurrences which belonged to a distant future, and in this case to "the end of the age." When Jerusalem fell, the people of God were not delivered, nor the enemies of God punished, nor did "the sign of the Son of Man" appear in the heavens, as was predicted of the time when He comes again; and long after the fall of the city, John wrote in gospel and in Apocalypse of the coming of the King.

Nor is the coming of Christ to be confused with *death*. It is true that this dark messenger ushers us into an experience which is, for the believer, one of great blessedness; "to depart is to be with Christ, which is very far better," "to be absent from the body" is "to be at home with the Lord;" but death is for us inseparable from pain and loss and sorrow and tears and anguish; and even those who are now with their Lord, in heavenly joy, are waiting for their bodies of glory and for the rewards and reunions which will be theirs at the appearing of Christ.

More marvelous than the scenes at Pentecost, more startling than the fall of Jerusalem, more blessed than the indwelling of the Spirit or the departure to be with the Lord, will be the literal, visible, bodily, return of Christ. No event may seem less probable to unaided human reason; no event is more certain in the light of inspired Scripture. "This same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven shall so come *in like manner* as ye have seen Him go into heaven." "Behold, He cometh with clouds; and *every eye shall see Him*" (Acts 1:11; Rev. 1:7).

II. HIS COMING, GLORIOUS.

This coming of Christ is to be *glorious*, not only in its attendant circumstances, but also in its effects upon the Church and the world. Our Lord predicted that He would return "in His own glory, and the glory of His Father, and of the holy angels" (Luke 9:26). He will then be revealed in His Divine majesty. Once during His earthly ministry, on the mount of transfiguration, there was given to His followers a glimpse of the royal splendor He had for a time laid aside, and in which He will again appear.

As on the great day of atonement the high priest put off his usual robes "for glory and for beauty" and appeared in spotless white, when he offered the sacrifices for sin and went into the holy place to intercede for the waiting people, so our Great High Priest laid aside the robes of His imperial majesty when, stooping from heaven, He assumed His garb of sinless flesh, and offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice and entered into the holy places not made with hands to appear in the presence of God for us; but as the high priest again assumed his garments of scarlet and blue and purple and gold when he came forth to complete his work in the presence of the people, so Christ, when He returns to bless, and to receive the homage of the world, will be manifest in His Divine glory. (Heb. 9:24-28.) As He appeared to Isaiah in his vision, to the disciples on the holy mount, to Saul on his way to Damascus, to John on Patmos, so will the Son of Man appear when, as he prom-

ised, He is seen "sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64). Nothing could be more natural than such a triumphant return of the risen, ascended Lord. What a pathetic picture Christ would present in the history of the race, if, after all His claims and promises, the world should see Him, last of all, hanging on a cross as a malefactor, or laid lifeless in a tomb! "He was despised and rejected of men;" but He is to return again "with power and great glory," attended by thousands of the heavenly host. As the Epistle to the Hebrews strikingly says: "When He again bringeth in the first born into the inhabited earth He saith, And let all the angels of God worship Him" (Heb. 1:6).

"Thou art coming, O my Saviour,
 Thou art coming, O my King,
 In Thy beauty all resplendent;
 In Thy glory all transcendent;
 Well may we rejoice and sing:
 Coming! in the opening East
 Herald brightness slowly swells;
 Coming! O my glorious Priest,
 Hear we not Thy golden bells."

Then Christ will *reign in glory* over all the world. It is true that now "all power" has been given to Him "in heaven and on earth," but that power has not been fully manifest; "we see not yet all things put under Him." He has "sat down on the right hand of God," but He is "henceforth expecting till His enemies be made the footstool of His feet." He is now reigning, seated on His Father's throne; but this world is still in reality a revolted province, and Christ is yet to sit upon His own throne; then "before Him every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that He is Lord" (Heb. 10:12, 13; Phil. 2:10, 11).

These expressions need not be interpreted with such crass literalness as to suggest that Christ will rule visibly in some one earthly locality, "establishing in Jerusalem an oriental court;" but they at least mean that the coming of Christ will be followed by the universal reign of Christ. "When the Son

of Man shall come in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then shall He sit on *the throne of His glory*" (Matt. 25:31). He will determine who may enter and who must be excluded from His kingdom. He will then say: "Come ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Then will be fulfilled His prediction: "Not every one that saith unto Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many *will say to Me* in that day, Lord, Lord, . . . and then *will I* profess unto them, I never knew you, depart from Me, ye that work iniquity" (Matt. 7:21-23). He will be the supreme Judge, but He will also be manifest as the universal Ruler in His perfected kingdom. Then the voices will be heard proclaiming: "The kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15).

In this glory of Christ His followers are to share. *The resurrection of the dead* will take place when He returns: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits; then they that are Christ's at His coming." The *body* of the believer is thus to be raised in *glory*. "It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory." As to how the spirits now with Christ are to be united with their resurrection bodies, the Bible is absolutely silent; but we know that this will be at the coming of the Lord. (1 Cor. 15:22, 23, 42, 43.)

Then, too, the bodies of *living believers* will be glorified, and made deathless and immortal like the body of their Divine Lord. "For our citizenship is in heaven; whence also we wait for a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of His glory" (Phil. 3:20, 21). Sometimes it is carelessly said that "nothing is so sure as death"; one thing is more sure; it is this: some Christians will never die. One generation of believers will be living when Christ returns, and they will be translated, without the experience of death. What

“is mortal will be swallowed up of life.” They never will be “unclothed,” but “clothed upon” with the glory of immortality. “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump; for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor. 15:51, 52; 2 Cor. 5:4).

Then, also, will be the blessed *reunion in glory* of the risen and the transfigured followers of Christ. “For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

“Some from earth, from glory some,
Severed only ‘Till He Come.’”

The time of the return of the Lord will be, furthermore, the time of *the reward* of His servants. The Son of Man is likened to a nobleman who has gone “into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return.” He has entrusted various talents to his servants with the command to use them wisely, until his return. When he has “come back again, having received the kingdom,” *then* he “maketh a reckoning with them.” It is popularly said, and in a sense it is true, that when our loved ones go to be with Christ “they have gone to their reward;” but more strictly speaking, the full reward of the blessed awaits the coming of Christ. Whatever may be meant by being “set over many things,” or having “authority over ten cities,” the complete recompense of the faithful is “at the resurrection of the just.” (Matt. 25:14-23; Luke 19:11-27; Luke 14:14.)

That the real coronation day of the Christian is not at

death but at "the appearing of Christ" was strikingly suggested by Paul when, realizing that he was to die before the Lord returned, he gave to Timothy his triumphant farewell: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give to me *at that day*: and not to me only, but also to all them that have loved *His appearing*" (2 Tim. 4:7, 8). So Peter encourages pastors to be faithful, by the familiar promise: "And when the chief Shepherd *shall be manifested*, ye shall receive the crown of glory that fadeth not away" (1 Peter 5:1-4). In large measure this reward will consist in being changed into a moral likeness to Christ. This is far more marvelous than the transfiguration of our bodies, but no less real. "Beloved, now are we the children of God, and it is not yet made manifest what we shall be. We know that if He shall be manifested, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him even as He is" (1 John 3:1-3). The reward which awaits the followers of Christ further includes the fulfilment of the blessed prophecies which declare the saints are *to reign* with Christ. "Know ye not that the saints shall judge the earth . . . Know ye not that we shall judge angels?" "If we endure we shall also reign with Him." "I appoint unto you a kingdom . . . and ye shall sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." (1 Cor. 6:2, 3; 2 Tim. 2:12; Luke 22:30.) Whatever may be denoted by promises so full of wonder and mystery, they do not mean that "the saints are to rule on earth *in the flesh*." Believers will previously have been "raised in glory," transfigured, translated. As co-regents with their Lord they may be privileged to perform blessed ministries for the world, but they nevertheless will belong to His immortal and heavenly kingdom. "They are like the angels of God . . . being the children of the resurrection" (Luke 20:35, 36).

Such a rule of Christ and His people must secure unparalleled blessedness for the world. "The end of the world" does not mean, in prophecy, the end of the earth and the destruction

of its inhabitants; but the end of "the present age," which is to be followed by *an age of glory*. The "present evil age" is predicted to close amid scenes of fiery judgment upon the enemies of God, and with portents and convulsions which will affect the very earth itself; but the results will be what is figuratively described as the "new heavens and the new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness." Nature itself will become more beautiful and joyous. "The whole creation which is groaning and travailing in pain together until now will be delivered from the bondage of corruption unto the liberty of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). In spite of the sin and failures of man, we are not to look for the destruction of this globe, but for an era when the true full life of humanity will be realized, when all shall know the Lord, from the least unto the greatest, when all art and science and social institutions shall be Christian, when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isa. 2:1-4). Such an age, of which poets have sung and philosophers have dreamed, such an era as psalmists, and prophets, and apostles have promised, will dawn at the coming of the King. Inspired by such a hope the waiting Church has learned to sing:

"Come, Lord, and tarry not;
Bring the long looked for day;
O, why these years of waiting here,
These ages of delay?

"Come, and make all things new;
Build up this ruined earth;
Restore our faded Paradise,
Creation's second birth.

"Come, and begin Thy reign
Of everlasting peace;
Come, take the kingdom to Thyself,
Great King of righteousness."

III. IMMINENT.

The Bible further describes the coming of Christ as *imminent*. It is an event which may occur in any lifetime. Whatever difficulties the fact involves, there is no doubt that all the inspired writers and their fellow Christians believed that Christ might return in their generation. This has been the normal attitude of the Church ever since. Paul describes believers as men "who have turned to God from idols" and who "wait for His Son from heaven." Christians are further described as "those that wait for Him," and as "those that love His appearing." They are everywhere in the New Testament exhorted to "watch," and to be ready for the return of their Lord. His coming is their constant encouragement and inspiration and hope. (1 Thess. 4:10; 2 Peter 4:8; Matt. 24:42; Mark 13:35, 37; Luke 21:36; Phil. 4:5.)

However, "imminent" does *not* mean "*immediate*." Confusion of these ideas has led some writers to assert that "Paul and the early Christians were mistaken in their views as to the Lord's return." But, when Paul used such a phrase as "*we* that are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord," he meant simply to identify himself with his fellow Christians, and to suggest that, if he lived until Christ came, their blessed experience would also be his. He could not have said, "*ye* that are alive and remain;" that would have indicated that Paul was to die first. This he did not then know. He believed that the Lord *might* return in his life time; he never asserted that He *would*.

"Imminence" as related to our Lord's return indicates *uncertainty* as to time, but *possibility* of nearness. "Take ye heed, watch, for ye know not when the time is" (Mark 13:33). Such statements rebuke those who have brought the doctrine into disrepute by announcing dates for "the end of the world," and by setting times for the coming of Christ. So, too, they suggest caution to those who assert that the age is *now* drawing to its close; it *may* be, but of this there is no certainty. These Scriptural exhortations to watch seem to contradict, also, those who teach that a "Millennium," a thousand years or a

protracted period of righteousness, *must* intervene between the present time and the advent of Christ.

Those who hold this last view are commonly called "Post-Millennialists" to distinguish them from "Pre-Millennialists," who hold that the return of Christ will precede and usher in such an age of universal blessedness.

The great objection to the Pre-Millennial position is the apparent prediction of 2 Peter 3, that at the coming of Christ, in "the day of the Lord," the earth will be destroyed; there could then be *no place* for a millennium. The difficulty in the Post-Millennial theory is the repeated description of this present age as one of mingled good and evil, in which iniquity, as well as righteousness, continues to develop uninterruptedly; there is thus *no time* for a millennium before the Lord returns. As to the passage from Peter, it is obviously no more subversive of one of these theories than of the other. No one can possibly review the picture, which the Apostle draws in his two epistles, of the apostasy and skepticism and godlessness already prevailing and surely deepening as "the day of the Lord" draws near, and find any place for a previous millennium before "that day." The predictions of fiery judgments and consequent "new heavens and new earth" must be read in connection with Isaiah 65 and 66, from which Peter is quoting. It will then be seen that these expressions are in-so-far figurative that the earth still continues with its life, its nations, its progress, after these judgments are over. Terrific convulsions, and governmental, social and cosmic changes, only introduce a new and better age. So, too, "the day of the Lord" is a familiar phrase, and as we read Zech. 14 we see that while, in that day, the Lord comes amidst appalling portents, His coming and the day itself are followed by a scene of great blessedness on this same earth; the Nile is still flowing in its course and the nations are going up to Jerusalem to worship. (Note also that in 2 Pet. 3:10 the most ancient manuscripts do not read "burned up" but "discovered.")

There are other positive statements of Scripture which intimate that *the millennium* follows the coming of Christ.

According to Daniel, it is *after* the Son of man comes with

the clouds of heaven that He is given "dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve Him, . . . and the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdom *under the whole heaven,*" are "given to the people of the saints of the Most High; . . . and all dominions shall serve and obey Him" (Dan. 7:13, 14, 27). According to the Psalms, the appearing of the Lord, in flaming fire upon His adversaries, *prepares the way* for the establishment of His glorious kingdom, as "He comes to rule the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity" (Ps. 96, 97, 98, etc.). According to Paul (2 Thess. 1 and 2) the advent described by Daniel is not to an earth which is enjoying millennial peace, but it is "in flaming fire" to destroy an existing "Man of Sin" whose career is the culmination of the lawlessness already manifest and to continue until the personal coming of Christ. According to our Lord Himself His return is to bring "the regeneration," not the destruction of the world (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30). But this rule of blessedness is preceded by judgments that come "as a snare on all the earth" (Luke 21:29-36). According to Peter, "seasons of refreshing" and "the restitution of all things," not annihilation of the globe, will come with the return of Christ (Acts 3:19-21). According to John, the coming of Christ (Rev. 19) *precedes* the millennium. (Rev. 20.)

However great the divergence of views among students of prophecy may seem to be, and in spite of the many varieties of opinion among the representatives of the two schools which have been mentioned in passing, the *points of agreement* are far *more important*. The main difference is as to the order, rather than as to the reality of events.

The great body of believers are united in expecting both an age of glory and a personal return of Christ. As to many related events they differ; but as to the *one great precedent condition* of that coming age or that promised return of the Lord there is absolute harmony of conviction: *the Gospel must first be preached to all nations* (Matt. 24:14). The Church must continue to "make disciples of all the nations . . . even unto the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19, 20).

This is therefore a time, not for unkindly criticism of fellow Christians, but for friendly conference; not for disputing over divergent views, but for united action; not for dogmatic assertion of prophetic programs, but for the humble acknowledgment that "we know in part;" not for idle dreaming, but for the immediate task of evangelizing a lost world.

For such effort, no one truth is more inspiring, than that of the return of Christ. None other can make us sit more lightly by the things of time, none other is more familiar as a Scriptural motive to purity, holiness, patience, vigilance, love. Strengthened by this blessed hope let us press forward with passionate zeal to the task that awaits us:

"Till o'er our ransomed nature
The Lamb for sinners slain,
Redeemer, King, Creator,
In bliss returns to reign."