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THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST.

(A Postmillennarian View.)

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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

to this earth, and be the most potent factor in all its immortal story. "As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death *till he come.*" The Lord's Supper is both a history and a prophecy—a history, pointing back to the sublimest event in the annals of time or in the records of eternity, the atonement—and a prophecy, pointing forward to the most significant thing to happen in all the future, the Second Coming of Christ. If either is fiction, the Christian is silly.

Our Lord, in his discourses, repeatedly and solemnly exhorted his disciples to be continually on the lookout for his return to the earth (Matt. 24:25). He said, on the eve of his crucifixion, "I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again" (John 14:2, 3). At the moment of his ascension, "two men in white apparel" (supposedly angels) said to his gaping disciples, "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" (Acts 1:11). Paul as a representative expositor of the teachings of Christ held his Second Coming before Christians as a central hope and supreme reason for patience and fidelity (Thessalonians). And John closed the New Testament canon by inscribing at the end of the holy book the prayer, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

It is true that all ideas in the Bible, as in common life, are used both literally and metaphorically. And the Second Coming of Christ is no exception. Some references to it are figurative and spiritual, but some others are literal and exact. The expositor who does not let the context decide for him, in each particular place, in which way the idea is to be taken, will soon find himself so confused that he will be multiplying the comings of his Lord.

Christians, however, are not agreed as to (1) the object, (2) the circumstances, (3) the time, of the Second Coming of Christ. It is their divergence upon these three topics which divides them into two schools of eschatologists—post-millennarians and pre-millennarians. Both parties profess fealty to Christ and the Scriptures. Neither makes its views a test of orthodoxy. Each feels that the interpreter of prophecy ought to be governed by

a modest spirit, when he ventures beyond the most obtrusive outline. A self-confident dogmatism is felt to be offensive. The nature of the subject precludes all speculation. Each attempts to do nothing but construe the facts of divine revelation.

I. *The Object of Christ's Second Coming.*—Why is Christ going to return to this world? Having been in it and gone out of it, what object will he have in coming back to it? On this point our two eschatologists do not read the Scriptures alike.

They both tell us that Christ will come back to this world to set up his kingdom, and reign on the earth. In describing the object of our Lord's return, each vies with the other in using thronal language, royal figures and regal concepts. They thus appear to be agreed as to the aim and purpose of the Second Advent.

But when they come to prefixing a definite adjective to that kingdom which Christ is to set up on his return, it is clear that they have entirely different notions about the real meaning and purpose of the Second Coming. For the postmillennarian, he is coming back to the earth to set up a *Heavenly Kingdom*. For the premillennarian, he is coming to set up a *Millennial Kingdom*.

1. The *Heavenly Kingdom* is the *final* form of the scheme of grace—the very last act in the programme of redemption. It is the kingdom of glory—the goal and permanent consummation of that which started at the gates of Eden in the protevangelium, “the seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head.”

Consequently, in this view, Christ will not return as a soldier to carry on the evangelical warfare to farther stages, but as a conqueror whose last battle has been fought, and whose victory is complete.

Or, to change the figure, Christ's labors are over. His work is finished. He will not return to complete the redemptive task. When he returns, the “house of many mansions” will be finished to the last detail and specification. When he took his departure, he commissioned his Spirit, through his Church, to complete the entire gospel project. This we are distinctly taught in the sixteenth chapter of John's Gospel.

The object of the first advent was to lay the foundations of

the *basileia* (the kingdom). Since that advent, whether prophetic and anticipatory as in the Old Testament, or historic and actual as in the New Testament, the Kingdom of Grace has been progressing towards the Kingdom of Glory. The Spirit of God, with the Church as his working force, has been the active agent in executing the royal programme. The *ekklesia* (the Church) is a means to the end of the *basileia* (the kingdom). When he returns, the Spirit, through the Church, will have accomplished all that was to be done, and will turn over to the Redeemer a *finished task*, and Jesus will be crowned and acclaimed the "Lord of glory." This is the postmillennarian idea of the object of Christ's return.

2. On the other hand, the premillennarian thinks the Lord will come the second time to set up a *Millennial Kingdom*—a preliminary kingdom on the earth, to be succeeded, after a longer or shorter time, by the final and heavenly state. This prefatory, or Millennial Kingdom, is held to be a means to an end—a means to the Heavenly Kingdom as an end, or final object. After the Second Coming, and through it, there is to be further progress in the execution of the general redemptive programme.

Consequently, Christ will come in person to take command of his forces, and lead them on to complete and final triumph. He will come as a worker, and personally assume the direction of all his laborers, and himself finish the "job." This; however the details may be sketched.

The postmillennarian, however, cannot see how the personal presence of Christ can contribute anything to the final object. In the economy of redemption, it is the office of the *Spirit* to convince and convert—to make all the practical application of the work of Christ. He can bestow that saving Spirit from his throne in heaven just as easily as from a throne in Jerusalem, and all that is done must be done entirely by his Spirit. No man is converted by coming in contact with his personality. When he came the first time, the world promptly crucified him; and if he comes the second time, and the world is unchanged, it can but give him a similar reception. Then, *cui bono*—what is the advantage in his returning to an unsanctified world? He cannot add a mite to the progress of his kingdom: every

atom of that must be done by his Spirit, through his Church.

II. *The Circumstances of the Second Coming.*—These two eschatologies are not only disagreed as to the object of Christ's Second Coming, but they are also, and consequently, disagreed as to the circumstances, or order of events, of his Second Coming.

These eschatological events are: (1) The Ingathering of the Gentiles—Paul's *pleroma ton ethnon*—sometimes loosely called the "Conversion of the World"; (2) The Ingathering of the Jews—Paul's *pleroma ton Ioudion*—sometimes freely called the "Conversion of the Jews"; (3) The Development of Antichrist—Paul's Revelation of the Man of Sin; (4) The Millennium; (5) The General Resurrection of the Dead; (6) The Final Judgment; (7) The Consummation of the Heavenly Kingdom, or the Kingdom of Glory.

This is a list of the leading events which loom upon the pages of our prophetic Scriptures, and in the series, What is the place of the Second Coming?

1. The postmillennarian thinks the first four are preliminary to, and the last three are concomitants of, the Second Coming. He thinks that the work of grace will go on, by the Spirit and through the Church, until God has gathered to himself all his elect from among the Gentile nations of the earth; on, until he has gathered to himself all his elect from among the Jewish portion of the world; on, until the principles of evil have consolidated themselves into Antichrist, the Man of Sin, the "Mystery of Iniquity" who is working and developing concurrently with the "Mystery of Grace."

He thinks that, while the "Mystery of Grace" is thus at work against the "Mystery of Iniquity," there will be a Millennium—not a "dispensation," but a "period," in which Christ will copiously pour out his Spirit, signally bless the means of grace, and make an extraordinary display of the saving power of his gospel. He thinks that the glorious phenomena that will characterize the Millennium will be due to the Spirit, operating through the Church. He believes in a Millennium, but he believes it will be inaugurated by the Spirit, and not by Christ in person.

He thinks that the Millennium will be prefaced by a dark and distressing apostasy—a kind of chaotic condition, which will be a fitting background for the millennial revival, which will demonstrate the efficiency of the ordained means of grace, and show to this world that the Spirit of God is no failure.

When he makes an inventory of the “signs of the times”—the formal near-evangelization of the world; the general religious confusion, both as to faith and practice; the widespread social discontent, threatening the very foundations of the social order; the gigantic political upheaval, now in progress on the continent of Europe; the prevalent commercialism, everywhere proclaimed and complained against; the disasters that rationalism and false philosophies are bringing upon us;—when he sits down with these chaotic forces, which are so conspicuously playing upon the future of the world, he thinks it *possible* that the hour may be ripening for the millennial revival. Maybe it is the darkness that may immediately precede the millennial dawn.

After the Millennium, a longer or shorter time, and concurrent with the General Resurrection, the Last Judgment, and the Consummation of the Heavenly Kingdom, he thinks Christ will come the second time. He consequently places the Second Coming at the end of the eschatological series of events.

2. The premillennarian, on the other hand, places the Second Coming at the beginning of the Millennium, and thinks that Christ will inaugurate it in person, with his seat at Jerusalem. For him it is Christ’s personal “dispensation” of the gospel, as contrasted with “this age” which is the Spirit’s “dispensation” of the gospel. There is great variation of detail, such as the millennial coming of Christ, the appearance of Christ, and the coming at the end of the world. In this brief essay, I only attempt to draw the sketch in broadest outline. It is one of the criticisms upon the premillennarian programme, that no man can state it to the satisfaction of its friends. Is it because he cannot comprehend it; or because he will not comprehend it; or because the confusion is inherent?

III. *The Time of the Second Coming.*—Of course no one, in his senses, professes to know the day or the hour when the

Son of Man will return to this earth. There is no calendar by which the day can be calculated, no chronometer by which the hour can be determined. There is only a schedule of events, like the spring budding of the fig tree, that justifies a "watchful waiting," an open-eyed looking forward. "But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only . . . Watch: therefore, for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come" (Matt. 24:36, 42).

All of us, however, do know that the Second Coming cannot be premature, nor yet behind time. There was a "fulness of time" for the First Advent, which could not have been anticipated, and beyond which it could not have been postponed. So there is a "fulness of time," a ripeness of programme, for the Second Advent. Before that hour Christ cannot come, nor one moment after it can his return be delayed. It cannot occur sooner nor later, but only on the exact stroke of the clock. It will be sudden and unexpected to this world, but it will not take the Almighty by surprise. He will come when the divine grace and providence have matured the occasion.

The premillennarian, however, is persuaded that it will be at the "end of this age," and the postmillennarian believes it will be at the "end of the world." These are their respective dates for this momentous event.

Premillennarians, consequently, think that the Second Coming is always an immediately impending event—something that may happen at any moment. For them it is the next great event which is pressing against the future, and may break through at any time.

Many interpret the Apostles as holding this view, and represent them as having lived in daily expectancy of their Lord's return. They consequently died in disappointment.

They likewise think it is the duty of every Christian to live, straining his eyes to the future in steady expectancy of Christ's descent from the skies at any moment.

This idea of the impendency of the Second Coming seems to be based, principally, upon that saying of Christ in his great discourse in which he mingled a prophecy of the end of Jerusalem, the end of the Jewish nation, and the end of the world:

“This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled” (Matt. 24:34).

These words are much litigated. The debate is over the meaning of “this generation.” To whom does this phrase refer? If to the *current* generation of men, contemporary with Christ, it is hard to understand how the prophecy has been fulfilled, except metaphorically. If to the Christian generation, *current to this “age,”* then it would seem to teach premillennial expectancy. But if “this generation” means the *Jewish people*—as a long list of commentators think—then the saying means that the Jewish people, as a people, shall not pass away until the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the world. The way in which the divine providence preserves the identity of this people, among all nations, and amidst all that is calculated to mingle and merge them with other races, makes this interpretation very likely to be the true one.

Paul, however, has put himself on record very clearly as not holding this doctrine of the impendency of the Second Coming. “Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and the man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition” (2 Thess. 2:1-3).

He thus earnestly beseeches them not to let that idea of the impendingness of the Second Coming get into their heads. He says he never taught such a notion; that it was never in his mind, nor did he ever express it in words, or write it in a letter. Such a notion was utterly foreign to his spirit. The day of the Lord must be preceded by the apostasy and the revelation of the man of sin and son of perdition. It takes time for “the mystery of iniquity to work,” and reveal that “Wicked” “whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth.” Paul and the apostles did not live under the spell of such a notion.

It was “expedient” for Christ to “go away” from the world,

and send the "Comforter" to it, which is the Holy Spirit. And it is "expedient" for him to remain away from the world until the "Comforter" has finished his entire work of convincing and converting the "pleroma" of Gentiles and Jews, and revealing the man of sin, the mystery of iniquity, the son of perdition. What could be best done then by his "departure," can be best done now by his continued absence to the very "end of the world."

Then what do I pray for when I say, "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly?" I am praying to him who is on the mediatorial throne, not to come prematurely, but to hasten all those preliminaries—the ingathering of the Gentiles, the ingathering of the Jews, the Millennium and the revelation of Antichrist—which are bulletined as the precursors of the Second Coming. Before the Heavenly Kingdom can be consummated in "the new heavens and the new earth," the work of the Spirit, through the Church, must be done. For this, "Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come." But I would not have him return until the last elect Gentile and the last elect Jew has been "effectually called," and all that is incorrigible and antichristian is ripe for destruction for ever and ever. I am tired of sin and misery: I want to see them wiped from the face of the earth forever. But I want to see all God's people saved. Hence I pray, "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly."