

THE VITAL CONNECTION
BETWEEN
THE GOSPEL COMMISSION
AND
THE RETURN OF CHRIST

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According to Albert Schweitzer "the whole history of Christianity, down to the present day, that is to say, the real inner history of it, is based on the delay of the Parousia, the non-occurrence of the Parousia. . . ."¹

The logic of Schweitzer's statement is plain when one considers the tantalizing question that has bubbled up in the thinking of Christians in every generation. "If the death of Christ was the atonement for the world's sin, and the end of the old era as well as the beginning of the new, why did not the second advent come quickly on the heels of the first?"

Christ has given his answer. ". . . the gospel must first be preached to all nations." Mk 13:10. "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come." Mt 24:14. See also Rev. 14:6,7,14. In each section of Scripture where both the certainty of Christ's return and the preliminary signs are given, it is the fulfillment of the gospel fulfillment that is most prominent among the latter.²

Centuries ago John Calvin in his comments on 2 Thess^{1:2} declared that the power restraining the eschatological manifestation of Antichrist was the missionary proclamation of the church. In our day Oscar Cullmann and others have echoed Calvin.³ But quite apart from from Hanse calls this "mysterious apocalyptic passage"⁴, the Bible's last book is repeatedly emphatic that it is the world-wide spread of the gospel which provokes Satan's final onslaught on truth and the truth-bearers. ?

It is this fact which endorses the so-called "harvest principle", but not in the sense used by some perfectionists. There is to be a final flowering of good and evil on a world-wide scale. Loyalty and disloyalty will

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displayed globally. The harvest metaphor is prominent not only among the Old Testament prophets and the synoptics but also in Revelation. See, for example, Joel 3:13; Mk 4:26-29; Mt 13:39; Rev 14:14-20.

The mystical Armageddon is actually the ultimate manifestation of universal attitudes to the cross. There is to be no reaping of earth until the harvest is ripe, and fruit both of good and evil fully matured. Apparently this little world is a lesson book to the universe. God loves not only this runaway earth, but also the ninety and nine other worlds which have never rebelled. He has permitted sin, only in order to safeguard his infinite domains from any repetition of such an experiment. The church here below demonstrates to the principalities and powers in heavenly places the manifold wisdom of God. We are a theater to the universe, to angels, and to men. See Eph 3:9,10; 1 Cor 4:9. The great controversy between good and evil on earth began in one place with one man and one woman. Only when the whole globe with all its inhabitants has taken its stand for or against the Creator, only when all everywhere have shown their response to the love of God manifested at Calvary--only then will the end come. Men will judge themselves as they hear the gospel, and their decisions will be confirmed by divine acknowledgement in the great Judgment day. Armageddon is that day. Compare Joel 3:12 with the Rev 16 scenario.

Only this view can give sense to God's continuing permission of Satanic activity, and particularly the phenomenon of the final Antichrist. Antichrist is to be the divine instrument for polarizing the world into two camps--one of which will reflect the seal of God, the likeness of Christ, and the other (with the mark of the beast) reflecting their leader--Satan. One company from every nation, kindred, tongue and people, will be threatened with a repetition of Calvary (not in its atonement sense, but as the flowering of

ity to the law of Jehovah). The other company, by its murderous decrees against the saints (Rev 13:13-18) will reveal to the universe that deception by sin leads to the ultimate development of satanic characters hardened by lying and murderous intent.

Such constitutes the main burden of the final prophetic picture of Scripture. According to Rev 16 there is to be a gathering of the "kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle". The scarlet whore is to reign triumphantly "over the kings of the earth", even all "peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues." These give their power to the beast that it might "make war on the lamb" and "those with him". ". . . all who dwell on earth shall worship it" except the saints. But, simultaneously, a message enshrining the everlasting gospel gives warning to the poised and threatened multitudes. Rev 14:6-12.

From the opening of the Apocalypse this final conflict between the gospel of Christ and the false gospel of Antichrist is sketched. The opening vision is a key to the book as it presents us with a vision of light challenging darkness-- the glorious irradiated king-priest on high attending to His lamps (the church) and stars (leaders of the missionary body). The same imagery of light displacing darkness continually recurs throughout the book. See 6:1 (the lustrous horse); 7:2 (the sun-rising); 10:1; 11:4; 12:1; 18:1; 19:17; 21:23, 22:25. The good news of the atonement is the most brilliant light this world knows, but it ever arouses not only gratitude and love, but hatred and opposition.

The chapters of Revelation have as their central theme the progress, trials and triumphs of the lightbearers who light the way for the returning Saviour. In the heart of this prophetic history we find a significant question and answer that illuminates the problem of the delayed Parousia.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. 5

The comments of Herman Hoeksema are illuminating for all seeking to plumb the anguished cry of the martyrs.

... this time that these souls must wait before their blood shall be avenged in the day of judgment publicly is also further defined, and defined materially. How long must they wait? The answer is: until their fellowservants and brethren, that should be killed even as they were, should have fulfilled their course. This is plain language. It simply means that the time is as yet not ripe for judgment. The world has not yet shown its real character in all the hatred of its corruption. And before the world is ripe for that day of judgment, the Lord cannot and will not come. We find this phenomenon in time and again in Holy Writ. The prediluvian period lasted about sixteen hundred years before the measure of their iniquity was full. And even when the climax was almost reached, the Lord still gave them one hundred twenty years in which they might hear the testimony of God through Noah, so that it might become fully evident that the day of judgment was a day of righteousness and justice. The same is true of the history of Israel. That history shows us that they had killed the prophets and stoned the messengers of God who had been sent against them. And it seemed as if the Lord would never visit them for their iniquity. But the time was not yet ripe. Not until they had revealed their hatred to the full, not until they had clearly shown that they rejected the Son of God, could the day of judgment come and Jerusalem be destroyed. These judgments, so the Bible tells us, are but typical of the great day of the Lord that is to come. And therefore, also for that day the time must be ripe, and the measure of iniquity must be filled. The witnesses of Christ also in the future must let their testimony go forth. They must witness of the Christ. They must witness of the blood of the cross. And over against this testimony the world must reveal its hatred still more plainly than already it has done in the past. In the past all these things were mere local affairs. In the future the Christian world in general, so-called, will rise up against the church. In the past the witnesses of Christ were butchered, but the enemy was not so directly conscious that they rose up against the name of Jesus Christ. In the future the enemy will be fully conscious that it is the hateful name of Jesus Christ that is the great obstacle to all their plans for the world. And thus the world becomes ripe for judgment. There are still a certain number who must be killed for the Word of God and for the testimony which they hold. And when they are killed, then the Lord will come and avenge His holiness and truth and establish His Kingdom forever. 6

Rev 6:9-11 should be compared with 11:7ff.

And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that ascends out of the bottomless pit will make war upon them and conquer them and kill them. . . . Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up hither!" And in the sight of their fellow they went up to heaven in a cloud. And at that hour there was a great earthquake....

This finishing of testimony is identical with the fulfillment of the gospel commission. ^{Rev 11} Mt 24:14 is ^α key to Rev 11:7. The beast cannot silence the church by its interdict until its task is completed. In this connection, we would warn readers against limiting the meaning of Rev 11 to the events of the French Revolution. Rev 11:7 with its warning of the resurrection of the beast parallels Rev 13 and its portrayal of the healing of the beast's wound of death. See also 17:8,11.

It should now be apparent that the New Testament habitually places the final proclamation of the gospel alongside the manifestation of Antichrist in eschatological resurgence. See ^{Rev 11} Mt 24:14,15; 2 Thess 2:9-12; ^{Rev 11} Rev 13 & 14; ~~Rev~~ 17:18. God does not warn one generation and destroy another. Neither does He destroy without warning. The generation that heard Noah's warning about the end of the world witnessed that event. The inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah who heard the testimony of Lot experienced the fate he threatened. The Jews who rejected the message of the apostles of Christ after Pentecost perished in the maelstrom of A.D. 70. Similarly, when the whole world has been told of the Judgment Day of Calvary and thereby is divided, as the cross divided between the penitent and the impenitent thief, -- "then shall the end come."

The words of G.C. Berkouwer are worthy of close thought:

The tie between eschatological expectation and mission call is essential and indissoluble. The church that fails to understand its mandate in this area inevitably becomes entangled in its own outlook on the meaning of the present dispensation. It is in imminent danger of wrapping itself up in an introverted, internal problematic that forfeits the meaning of the present dispensation. The expectation cannot remain vibrant and operative if the overwhelming richness of Christ's grace in the coming age is not shown and if the peace to which we have access in the Father is not proclaimed (Eph. 2:7,17f., cf. Isa 57:19). 8

FOOTNOTES

1. The Quest of the Historical Jesus, p. 358.

2. "Too often, reflection on the signs has been cut loose from the kingdom, their concentration-point. The results are always disconcerting. All the strongly apocalyptic words mean nothing unless they are centered in and receive their meaning from the Messiah."

"Wars and rumors of wars are considered the important signs. But the primary concern is the universal spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Mark 13:10). This preaching stands in a clearly eschatological context.... Usually those who have catalogued the signs of the times have included this, but frequently it has been seen as just another element in the 'narrative account'."

"In the last days the preaching of the gospel is the focal point of all the signs. In it the signs can and must be understood."

G.C. Berkouwer, The Return of Christ, pp 250-251.

3. See katecho TDNT 11:829

4. Hanse, ibid.

5. Rev. 6:9-11

6. H. Hoeksema, Behold, He Cometh, pp. 230-231.

7. Rev. 11:7,12,13.

8. G.C. Berkouwer, The Return of Christ, pp. 132-133

(Berkouwer's book published by Eerdmans in 1972 and Hoeksema's by Reformed Free Publishing Assn. 1969. Schweitzers of course was 1910 but my notes don't include the publisher.)