

J.A. Toward 1-778 No. 5
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THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN THE LIGHT OF THE PAROUSIA¹

Introduction:

Let me begin by quoting two passages from the letters of Peter addressed to the "Pilgrim Church" of the Apostolic Age. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God . . ." (I Peter 2: 9, 10a)

"Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God . . ." (II Peter 3:11, 12a)

(1) The discussion of the blessed hope of the church in an affluent society has a tendency to become academic and artificial in nature. In such a context the theological discussions tend to transform this living hope of the church into an eschatological system which can easily serve as an escape-mechanism from the responsibilities of a costly discipleship. It would be easier for us to find a common denominator in our eschatology, and to define the essence of our blessed hope, if all representatives gathered here had recently experienced severe persecution, or were facing certain martyrdom in the near future. Having said this, I hasten to add, that our doctrine is not to be shaped by our experience. The scriptures are the only normative guide to a proper formulation of doctrine, also the doctrine of the Parousia. Experience can be a great help, however, in understanding God's revelation.

(2) The textual references to the Parousia in the New Testament are almost overwhelming. Amid all that is hard to understand, one promise stands out clear and certain: Jesus Christ will come again! A careful reading of these passages will reveal, moreover, that they all have their "Sitz im Leben." Christ's discourse on Mount Olivet provides many examples of the relatedness of the Parousia to the conduct of the disciples. After his description of the suddenness and unexpected nature of his appearing Christ turns to them and says, "Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming." (Matt. 24:42). In the Gospels, as well as in the Epistles, the constant emphasis in connection with the Parousia is on "the manner of life" of God's people. (I was tempted to use the title of Francis Schaeffer's book: How Should We Then Live, as the topic for my reflections, but I decided not to do so because I have some reservations about the presuppositions as well as about the implications of his thesis.)

Perhaps an analogy between Christ's first and second advent can be helpful at this point. At the time of Christ's first coming, God's people were not prepared to receive Him

(John 1:11). This unpreparedness was not due to a lack of knowledge of the prophetic Word, especially among the leaders of Israel. (cf. Matt. 2:4-6). However false political expectations, and the spirit of materialism, had obscured the Messianic hope. Fortunately, there were those who were ready to receive Him as the promised Messiah - the Shepherds, Simeon, Anna, and others who were "looking for the consolation of Israel." (Luke 2:25) Does this account teach us something with regard to the kind of preparedness needed for the Parousia?

(3) The Parousia, according to the teaching of Christ, constitutes a call to readiness. "For this reason you be ready too, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will." (Matt. 24:44) How can the church be prepared to meet her glorious Savior and Lord? What constitutes spiritual readiness for the Parousia? What kind of state and disposition does the Second Advent call for according to the teaching of the New Testament? In this paper I shall attempt to provide some answers, although very inadequate, to the above questions.

I. The Parousia - A Call to Vigilance (Watchfulness)

In discussing the truth of His coming Christ repeatedly warned His disciples against the dangers of deception. In fact, He begins his Olivet Discourse with a warning. In response to the disciples' question: "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign, when all these things are going to be fulfilled." Jesus replies, "See to it that no one misleads you." (Mark 13:4-5) This danger of deception in connection with the Parousia will not grow less, according to the Apostle Paul, for "evil men and imposters will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived." (II Tim. 3:13)

One word that is often used by our Lord in his warnings is the word "alert". It is a term taken from the military life of that day. To be alert means to manifest the vigilance of a sentinel on duty. To be alert implies a quick intelligence and a readiness to take prompt action. The danger of deception is especially great in connection with two aspects that are related to the Parousia.

(1) The temptation of predicting the exact time of Christ's coming. Christ repeatedly warned His disciples against the danger. "Take heed, keep on the alert, for you do not know when the appointed time is." And again: "Therefore be on the alert. -for you do not know, when the master of the house is coming; whether in the evening, at midnight, at cock-crowing, or in the morning." (Mark 13:33, 35) Unfortunately, many Christians through the ages have ignored this warning and have been preoccupied with date-setting. Already in AD 100 the Epistle of Barnabas stated that "in six thousand years shall all things be consummated."² Joachim of Flora, arguing from Revelation 11:3, thought the end would come in 1260 AD!

The Anabaptist-Mennonite movement has not been immune to

this temptation. Melchior Hofman, a leader of the Chiliastic Anabaptists, predicted that the Lord would come to Strassburg in 1533 (since the Great Tribulation had begun in 1526). Klaas Epp and his group made the "Great Trek" to Central Asia in the 1880's because he expected Christ to come to the rescue of His people in 1889.

In America, William Miller, a founder of Seventh Day Adventism, set a date in 1843, and later in 1844, as the time of Christ's appearing. And the end is not yet! In recent years a book entitled Get all excited - Jesus is Coming Soon, circulated among our members on the West Coast. In this book a certain Dr. Taylor claimed to possess overwhelming proofs that the Lord would come on September 6, 1975. (The book came to my attention in October!) Let us heed Christ's parting words: "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority." (Acts 1:7)

Christ warns his disciples of a second danger in connection with the Parousia - the danger of identifying persons or events. (cf. Mark 13:6-7) Throughout history many false prophets have arisen who have claimed to have the key to all mysteries of the prophetic Word. Persons in contemporary history have been identified as the Beast and the False Prophet of Revelation 13. I remember clearly how Mussolini was identified as the Antichrist by leading American evangelicals prior to World War II. The European Common Market has been explained in terms of a revival of the Roman Empire. World War I was considered by many to be the Battle of Armageddon. And who has not heard pronouncements on the meaning of Gog and Magog, and even on the number 666! We need to remind ourselves again of the words of our Lord: "See to it that no one misleads you."

Perhaps even greater vigilance is required to detect the debilitating influences of secularism and intellectualism, of nationalism and materialism, on the blessed hope of the church. Only those who are spiritually alert and mature will be able to discern and overcome the Zeitgeist which seeks to squeeze the church into the mold of our contemporary culture and society. The Parousia constitutes a call to watchfulness and prayer.

II. The Parousia - A Call to Holiness

The writer of Hebrews is very explicit and emphatic on this point: "Pursue after peace with all men, and after the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord" (12:14) The Apostle Paul links together "looking for the blessed hope" and living "sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age." (Titus 2:12-13)

G.P. Eckman is right when he says: "The question is not, when will our Lord return, but how shall I behave until He does return? Conduct and not time is the pivot upon which all Christ's exhortations turned."³

In the New Testament church we see how the expectation of the Parousia is a powerful motive to good behaviour. The true church in this present age lives by the standards of the age to come. As those who have been delivered "from the domain of darkness and transferred . . . to the Kingdom of His beloved Son," we now have a "Kingdom ethic." This Kingdom ethic is characterized by righteousness and holiness. What does the call to holiness imply?

(1) A separation from the world. The popular term today is "involvement", not separation. Perhaps the term "separation" has fallen into disrepute because it is equated by many with isolation. In the context of the New Testament, separation leads to more effective penetration, to redemptive involvement. As Mennonite Brethren we need a new and deeper understanding and appreciation of biblical teaching on separation from a sinful society. The call to holiness and separation is imperative in the Scriptures. "Therefore come out from their midst and be separate, says the Lord, and do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you. And I will be a Father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me, says the Lord Almighty." (II Cor. 6:17, 18)

What does true separation mean for God's people today? It certainly means that we must take great care not to be involved in any activities and movements that would identify us with the present world order which is passing away. In our Conference guidelines we have suggested "selective" involvement in the political life of our countries. All too often, this involvement is not any more selective, but total and hence the redemptive and prophetic witness is lost. This is true also in many areas of our social and cultural life.

On our recent visit to both Mennonite and Baptist churches in the Soviet Union, we were impressed by the fact that the lines of demarcation between "church" and "world" are much more in evidence there. It is relatively easy to identify the Christians by their lifestyle and worship. Perhaps it is easier to be a "people separated unto God" in a hostile world than in a "Christianized" social and political order. But the call to holiness also implies

(2) A demonstration of a higher ethic - a "higher righteousness" (cf. Matt. 5:20). Peter connects the blessed hope with the call to holy conduct. He writes: "fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." And he immediately adds: "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behaviour." (I Peter 1:13-15)

To live righteously in a corrupt world is not easy. But those who live in the hope of the Parousia and the consummation of Christ's Kingdom will not shrink, in spite of the difficulty, from submitting here and now to the commandments of this coming

King. In his Olivet Discourse Christ compares the days before His coming to an earlier age in human history. "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah." (Matt. 24:37) The days of Noah are characterized as days of sensuality, violence, and moral corruption - in short, by "this-worldliness." Yet Noah did not conform to this age. He was a product of his faith - a faith in the age to come and not of the age in which he lived. This is what God expects of His people in the light of the Parousia.

III. The Parousia - A Call to Faithfulness

Faithfulness is that quality of character, by which an attitude or a relationship is maintained - even under severe testings and trials - unto the end. It is this disposition and loyalty that our Lord is looking for in his people, and which He will commend and reward at the time of His coming. "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life!" (Rev. 2:10)

(1) Faithfulness in Discipleship In the Book of Revelation a group of the redeemed is described as follows: "These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes." (Rev. 14:14)

The overcomers described in the book of Revelation are those who have not wavered in their obedience to His lordship - they have followed Him, wherever He went. There is an interesting little dialogue at the end of John's Gospel between Christ and Peter. The latter was concerned about the future of his fellow-disciple John, and he asks the Master: "Lord, what about this man?" The response of Jesus is significant: "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!" (John 21:22) Here is the great imperative, the primary mandate, for our life: Follow Christ'. We are to be faithful followers - until death, or until He comes.

A disciple identifies himself with His Lord at all times - in word and deed. He is not ashamed to confess Him before a crooked and perverse generation. This faithfulness in confession is a touchstone of our integrity as Christ's followers, and will determine His attitude toward us at the Parousia. "For whoever is ashamed of Me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." (Mark 8:38) It is the way of obedience and discipleship which leads to the rendezvous at the end. We have a beautiful illustration of such a glorious rendezvous at the end in the early history of man, "And Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him." (Gen. 5:24)

Christ will meet those, who have followed Him faithfully to the end. As Martin Niemöller puts it. "To follow Christ is to meet Him when He comes. If we do not follow Christ, we will miss Him when He comes."⁴

(2) Faithfulness in Stewardship A leading contemporary Lutheran theologian, T.A. Kantonen, introduces his discussion on stewardship with the following startling statement: ". . .

A stewardship program in the Church, if it is deeply rooted in a living theology, may come to have the same significance for the Twentieth Century that the revival of world missions had for the Nineteenth Century."⁵ And he continues by saying: "Stewardship is the believer's whole life lived in response to that revelation of divine truth with which theology deals."⁶ To this we are inclined to add, that it is especially a response to one particular truth in theology - the teaching on the Parousia. This becomes very obvious when one considers the parables of Christ, in which He inseparably links stewardship and the Parousia. (cf. Matt. 25:14-30, the Parable of the Talents). Although the central emphasis in Paul's writings is on the stewardship of the Gospel, an extension of this stewardship to ourselves and our possessions is a necessary inference. Our acquisition of possessions (James 5:1-11), our attitude towards possessions (I Timothy 6:17), and our sharing of possessions (I Timothy 6:18), are all strongly affected by living and working with a deep consciousness of the imminent return of Christ.

Although there has been a steady increase in absolute giving in our brotherhood, in recent years donations have not kept pace with rising incomes. I agree with a recent statement by Dr. Clark Pinnock, formerly of Regent College, that the real test of discipleship in the present day is the performance in our stewardship. How much money is spent by our members on luxuries in homes, travel for pleasure, sports and entertainment - the list is endless. The obvious inference must be, that the Parousia is not a dynamic reality in the lives of most of our members. Jonathan Edwards once said that "the nearness and the uncertainty of the time of Christ's coming is the regulative element in the Christian life." What has happened to this "regulative element" in our churches? Paul Peachey is deeply disturbed about this "terrible contradiction" among Evangelicals who show "a theoretical interest in eschatology that produces no effect upon the ethical character."⁷

In their exhaustive study, Anabaptists Four Centuries Later, Kauffman and Harder also deal with the question of stewardship. They discovered, that there is a direct correlation between the "Stewardship Attitudes Scale" and the "Stewardship Performance Scale." The church members who are stronger on stewardship tend also "to be stronger on other religious attainment scales, particularly the associationalism, devotionism, and evangelism scales."⁸ It is also interesting to note, that those who manifested a greater faithfulness in stewardship, scored higher in Bible knowledge and in knowledge of Anabaptism. A renewal in our faith and teaching of the Parousia, would produce revolutionary changes not only in our giving but in our whole lifestyle.

IV. The Parousia - A Call to Peace

"Pursue after peace with all men . . . without which no one will see the Lord." (Heb. 12:14) Here we have one of the great imperatives for the church living in the "last days". This is not an exhortation to maintain the "peace with God"

in our hearts, but rather to pursue "peace with all men." The Kingdom of God from its beginning to its consummation is a kingdom of peace. The heavenly messengers proclaimed this truth at the time of the King's arrival: "And on earth peace among men with whom he is well pleased." (Luke 2:14). Long before His birth, Isaiah described Him as the "Prince of Peace" and His kingdom as one in which there would be "no end to the increase of His government or of peace." (Is. 9:6, 7)

The Apostle Paul defines the essence of the kingdom in Rom. 14:17 as "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." Our ministry of reconciliation includes more than the proclamation of peace. It also implies peace-making. Only those involved in peace-making deserve the special designation, "Sons of God" (Matt. 5:9) Peter is concerned, that in the light of the Parousia, God's people should "be diligent to be found by Him in peace." (II Peter 3:14)

It seems strange, that this key note is almost completely missing in discussions on eschatology, both by evangelical theologians in general, and by dispensational theologians in particular. The so-called postponement theory provides a convenient escape from the responsibilities of costly discipleship in the present age. The kingdom of God is understood almost exclusively as a kingdom of the future (Millennium) in which Christ will reign as the "Prince of Peace." The teachings of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount on peace-making, nonresistance, and love of enemies, are relegated largely to the Age to Come.

If Christ's kingdom in the consummation will be a kingdom of peace (and Evangelicals are agreed that it will be) then it has been one from the beginning, and is one during this present age. There is no contradiction between the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. The end is in complete harmony with the beginning, and all that lies between the inauguration and the consummation of the kingdom. It is rather depressing to note, that, generally pacifism in any form is suspect by Evangelicals, while militarism is not only tolerated, but often sanctioned, and occasionally glorified.

In his book Envoys of Peace (The Peace Witness in the Christian World Mission) R. Pierce Beaver lists the various charges of third world leaders against the Christian church. None of these charges are as serious, according to the author, as the claim "that Christianity is responsible for the mess the world is in today."⁹ Native leaders declare the Christian faith to be the source of war, enmity between peoples, imperialism, colonialism, and social exploitation. The long list of fratricidal wars between "Christian" nations is recalled. The author admits, that "through the centuries the nominally Christian nations have had the worst record with regard to war among all civilized peoples."¹⁰ The faith and practice of Mennonite Brethren in this area according to the Kauffman Harder study, leaves much to be desired. The influence of American Fundamentalism has had

an eroding effect on our peace position.

The Parousia is a call to Mennonite Brethren for a renewal of commitment to their historic peace position. Let us give heed to the words of Scripture: "Pursue after peace with all men . . . without which no one shall see the Lord."

V. The Parousia - A Call to Missions

The close connection between missions and the Parousia is clearly established in the New Testament. "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached to the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come." (Matt. 24:14) In his book, The Return of Christ, G. T. Manley suggests a connection between Christ's last recorded words on earth, and the last recorded words from heaven. The former are found in Acts 1:8 ". . . you shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem . . . and even to the uttermost part of the earth," and the latter in Revelation 22:20. "Yes, I am coming quickly."

One of the most powerful motives for missions is the imminent Coming of Christ, The Great Commission must be carried out before the Parousia. The New Testament knows nothing about the dividing of the Missionary Mandate - leaving a part of it to a converted Israel in the Millennium. The whole gospel, with all its privileges, has been given to the People of God in this present age. This whole gospel, with all its responsibilities including the "Great Commission" must be accepted by the church of this age. The true Christian will refuse "to eschatologize" (to use a phrase of J.H. Yoder) "it out of the realm of his earthly living and doing."¹¹ Paul constantly labored with the truth of the Parousia on the horizon of his "Day of Salvation." And so must we. Eschatology gives to evangelism a sense of urgency which can come from no other inspiration. Our discussions of the Parousia will be barren if they do not result in an inescapable summons to proclamation and a new obedience which will thrust the church forth into the world with a new zeal to evangelize this generation. In a certain Greek church, we are told, one sees, on leaving the building, a picture of the Second Coming. It is a reminder to the worshipers to return to the daily tasks with the Parousia always in their consciousness. We are called to proclaim His death, until He comes - not only at Communion but wherever we go.

In the light of the Parousia, the unfinished task of world evangelism should receive primary attention by the People of God. It appears that Christ expects to find His true followers involved in active service, not in pious contemplation, when He returns. "Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when He comes." (Matt. 24:46) True eschatology is always a call to action, never to retreat. The Apostle Paul closes the great eschatological chapter, I Corinthians 15, with a call to unyielding steadfastness and expanding services: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding

in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord." (15:58)

In conclusion, may I remind you once again of the fact, that biblical eschatology is not primarily a calendar of events, but the manifestation of a great and glorious person - Jesus Christ our Lord. J. Barton Payne focuses on the central truth in a proper eschatology in the following statement.

"The hope of the church is not that it may live unharmed through the tribulation, or that it may be removed from earth before the tribulation. Its fundamental hope is not even for its own rapture or its resurrection. Rather, the "blessed hope" for which every Christian heart should be yearning is "the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13) and the union with Him that will result."¹²

The touchstone of readiness for the Parousia is the love of the Bride for the Bridegroom. In his last prison letter Paul reminds Timothy, and all of us, that the Lord will award the crown of righteousness "on that day" . . . "to all who have loved his appearing." (II Timothy 4:8) True love for Christ generates and sustains this hope of reunion. The failure of the church in the last days is a "heart failure." (cf. Matt. 24:12) The record of the churches of Ephesus (Rev. 2:4) and Laodicea (Rev. 3:16) is a solemn reminder to the church of every age that all services and achievements are worthless without true love. The Parousia is a call to renewal of the covenant - a covenant of unconditional love and fidelity.

"Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with a love incorruptible." (Eph. 6:24)

ENDNOTES

1. Parousia is the Anglicized Greek word often used in the New Testament for the Second Advent of Christ. It has a rich scriptural connotation, implying both presence and arrival, both nearness and approach.
2. Quoted by Paul Erb in The Alpha and the Omega, p. 133.
3. Quoted by Erb, p. 143.
4. Quoted in The Mennonite, Sept. 14, 1954.
5. Quoted by Daniel Kauffman in New Frontiers - Stewardship and Mutual Aid Scottdale, Pa.: 1966. p. 1.
6. Ibid, p. 2.
7. Quoted by Erb, p. 143.
8. Kauffman, J. Howard, and Harder, Leland, Anabaptists Four Centuries Later Scottdale, Pa.: 1975. p. 242
9. Beaver, R. Pierce, Envoys of Peace Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1964. p. 43
10. Ibid, p. 65
11. Quoted by Erb, p. 142
12. Payne, J. Barton, The Imminent Appearing of Christ Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1962. p. 43