

## **The Second Coming: A Reformed Perspective.**

Human beings are insatiably curious. We want to know about our own personal future. We are also fascinated by predictions of future events. We are concerned about our youth. What kind of world will they inherit if the Lord does not come back in our time? What does the Bible say about wars, rumors of wars, persecution of Christians, the rise of false teachers, famines, earthquakes, the future of the world? How do we interpret Biblical prophecies? Speculation is rife. But preoccupation with the future is a vice and not a virtue. We must have our spiritual feet firmly planted on the solid ground of Scripture and history lest, we get carried away by all kinds of predictions. Remember that our generation is not the first to be anxious about the end times! When the year 1000 A.D. approached there was no mass hysteria in Europe as some historians claim. But there was widespread concern that the end was near. Prior to the year 2000, date setters titillated people's imaginations by discovering in the Bible the detailed news events of today. Some predicted that the world would end either on January 1 or some other date in the first year of the new millennium. For example, Yisrayl Hawkins, who runs a "Christian" cult, called the House of Yahweh, in Abilene, Texas, predicts that most of the world will perish on October 13, 2000, flaming out in a nuclear holocaust. Charles Mead, leader of End Times Ministries in Lake City, Florida, teaches that the world is headed for an apocalyptic drought that only his church members will survive. However, date setting is risky business. The Italian monk Joachim of Florence believed that Biblical prophecies pinpointed A.D. 1260 as the date of the new age, which would be characterized by the rise of new religious orders, which would convert the world. Mathematician and Bible student Michael Stifel predicted that the end of the world would come on October 3, 1553, at 8.00 a.m. When nothing happened on that day, the citizens of the German town of Lochau, where Stifel announced the dreaded day, rewarded his false prediction with a thorough flogging. And I am thinking of the once popular book *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. Who takes the blame when a prediction has come and gone and nothing happened? Why turn the Second Coming of Christ into a prophetic jigsaw puzzle and discredit the hope of the Church? When "literal" interpretations of prophetic passages turn out to be wrong or nothing happens on the predicted date of Christ's return, Christians are embarrassed and the credibility of the Gospel is damaged.

Why leave it up to the sects, cults, and fundamentalist prophecy speculators to speak about the return of our Lord? Of course, also Reformed Christians should be future oriented. The faith of the New Testament is dominated by the expectation of our Lord's return. As Kingdom citizens we should eagerly look forward to the return of our King and Saviour, Jesus Christ. When a Dutch citizen during the second World War didn't long for the return of the Queen in exile, he was called a poor citizen. When we no longer earnestly expect our King's return, we can't be called solid Kingdom citizens. But our task is not to figure out God's blueprint for the future. Only the heavenly Father knows when His Son is coming again (Matt. 24:36).

His coming will be unexpected, like a thief in the night.

And the New Testament urges us to live a godly life and always be ready for that return.

While we confidently look forward to our Lord's coming again, our future hope may not be an excuse for social inaction or a careless lifestyle. Lord Shaftesbury, the 19th century English evangelical social reformer, said near the end of his life, "I do not think that in the last forty years I have lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by the thought of our Lord's return." That conviction was obviously one of the strong motives behind his social programs. The Second Coming is a practical doctrine. If we are motivated by prejudice, tearing down or criticizing each other, harbor unkind thoughts and an unforgiving spirit - then the truth of our Lord's return has failed to make an impression on our thinking.

### **Our Lord's Reentry**

The Lord will return as He has promised! When He ascended to heaven, His disciples were looking intently up into the sky as He was going. Suddenly, two angels stood beside them and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:10f.). Dr. John Stott comments that we should not press the words of the angels into meaning that our Lord's second coming will be like a film of the ascension played backwards or that He will return to exactly the same spot on the Mount of Olives and will be wearing the same clothes. The "same Jesus" means that His coming will be personal, the Eternal Son still possessing His glorified human nature and body. "In the same way" means that His coming will be visible and glorious. His Second Coming will be so unlike His first coming. He won't arrive in obscurity and poverty. He will come as the King of glory, as Saviour and Judge. The apostle John, suffering in exile for his faith, was given the solemn assurance of the certainty of Christ's return. The forces of darkness and oppression would not have the last word! When those who crucified our Lord and persecuted His Church will see Him, they will fear and tremble. The enemies of the Church will perish and the children of God will be welcomed home. "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the people of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen"(Rev. 1: 7).

### **The Resurrection**

What happens to the believer when he or she dies before the Second Coming? His or her soul will enter into the blessed state of the saints of God's heaven. However, we must remember that heaven is not a permanent residence. The knowledge of heaven (the intermediate state) is of great comfort; but it can never be separated from the Biblical teaching on the resurrection of the body and the

renewal of the earth. After death the soul of the believer is with the Lord. The body is buried, awaiting the resurrection. The body is as important as the soul. When Christ returns, the dead will be raised, they will be reunited with their bodies. The resurrection of the body is the hope of the Church. From the very beginning of the early church, converts to Christ did not only turn from idols to serve the living and true God, but also lifted up their eyes in hope "to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead - Jesus, who rescues from the coming wrath." (1 Thess.1 :10) All human beings - body and soul - have been subjected to the power of sin and death. When Jesus Christ saved us, He saved us body and soul. Unlike Asian non-Christian religions, the Bible does not despise the body. We are "fearfully and wonderfully made."(Ps. 130: 14). What is our only comfort in life and in death? "That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." (Heidelberg Cat. Q.A.1) Therefore, we look eagerly forward to the return of "the Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under control, will transform our lowly bodies, so that they will be like his glorious body" (Phil. 3: 21).

From the very beginning of the early church, the belief in the resurrection was ridiculed. When in his Areopagus speech in Athens Paul proclaimed the resurrection from the dead, some sneered (Acts 17: 32). When the Gospel was proclaimed for the first time among the pagans in Lyons, the greatest offense was the proclamation of the resurrection of the dead. They captured Christians and burned them and then threw the ashes of those charred bodies to the four winds, saying, "Let's see whether the God of those Christians can raise their bodies again!" The mockers may scorn; but when Christ returns, He will give us a new body (1 Cor.15:50ff.). Death will be forced to surrender to Christ, even the bodies he held in his grip. The resurrection will be announced by "the last trumpet." Writing to the church in Thessalonica, Paul mentions that the ascended Christ "will come from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise" (1 Thess.4: 16). At the last reveille, there will be the miracle of the resurrection.

### **The New Heaven and Earth**

What will happen when Christ returns? We will inherit the new heaven and earth. And Scripture plainly teaches that the promised new earth is a real world, a new and happy homeland. Our Lord said, "I am making everything new!" (Rev. 21: 5). Isaiah describes the new heaven and earth as the place where God's people won't toil in vain. There won't be any question of an infant living only for a few days; people will continue to live youthful lives, build houses, plant vines and enjoy their fruit. (Isaiah 65: 17-25). Unlike His original creation, God will not create an entirely new world out of nothing. Out of the ashes of the Old World a New World will arise. The new earth will not be new in the sense as being brand new, that is, unused. It will be different in character and different from what it once was. Relationships in the New World will be different from what they are in

the present earth. How gloriously different they will be we cannot even begin to imagine now. There is no proper earthly language to describe the unspeakable glory of our rich inheritance awaiting us. After Christ's return, heaven and earth will be joined; they belong together. From Genesis on, God announced His intentions to restore the world and save a people for Himself. In this restored and purified world, we will have glorified resurrection bodies. In this New World we will progress in knowledge, develop our talents, play our games and sing our songs. In the new earth there will be the absence of former things: no tears, no death, no sorrow or crying. God will establish His righteous rule in the new earth. His kingdom will be a kingdom of perfect freedom and of infinite love; a world where Jesus Christ Himself "will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all" (1 Cor.15: 28). Indeed, for God's people the best is yet to come!

## **Paradise**

Scripture describes the new earth as the lost paradise regained. Our Lord's promise is: "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is the paradise of God (Rev 2:7). The tree of life in the old paradise was only a foreshadowing of the real tree of life in the new paradise. We must not picture paradise regained as a return to the paradise of old. Paradise regained will be far more glorious than the first one. The entire new creation is the paradise where God's people will have perfect fellowship with Him. It is the place where they can no longer be tempted, a garden without the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

## **The New Jerusalem**

The human race was created in a garden but their destination is a city. We are looking forward to a new city which will be built by God Himself (Heb11: 10,16) This is not modeled after cities founded by men. Its origin is in heaven. It is called, Zion, or the New Jerusalem, after the city of David (Heb12: 22) The apostle John saw in a vision the new heaven and earth. He also saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband (Rev 21: 1, 2). This new city on the new earth is not a literal but a symbolic city. All what John describes in the book of Revelation is highly symbolic, trying to express in words things too marvelous to behold. There is nothing strange about the symbolism of the New Jerusalem and the connection of the bride and the bridegroom. A city is more than a collection of buildings. A city is a sociable community. Jerusalem means safety, purity, holiness, peace and light. The city is the church, the new community of God living on the new earth. Dr. Roger S. Greenway described the church on the new earth as the heavenly urbanites, drawn by bonds of grace from all races, nations, and language groups, new-city citizens who will live in perfect harmony as God's redeemed people, His new covenant community. One key thought will control

all the activities of these urbanites. God will be all in all. He will be the temple and the light and the source of joy, strength, and purpose. His service will be the occupation of God's people. Their hunger and thirst for the living God will be completely satisfied. (Rev. 22:1-6) Today's church should remember her glorious destiny. She can be so caught up in all the cares of this world that she forgets that the Lord has the last word and not the world. He will bring the New Jerusalem down to earth and not us.

How shall we live as we wait for the Lord's return? We should not panic and prepare for some future disaster. We don't need to be anxious about tomorrow. The entire future, both of our own and that of the world, are in the hands of our sovereign God. He has already determined the time of His Son's return. Our call is not the deciphering of God's secret counsel but to fulfill our present duty. We are to be the light and the salt in God's world. The Bible says, "For the grace of God that brings salvation...teaches us to say 'no' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live – self controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope -the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:11-13).

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