

# Response to “The Eschaton”

PAUL S. MINEAR

32

I am conscious of one major difficulty in approaching this task. Whereas Cottrell and his teammates can speak with a sense of representing a quite definite and authoritative point of view on eschatology, there is no such well-defined or normative eschatology among the churches of the National Council or within the various member churches. Even if there were such a point of view on the interpretation of Daniel, of Revelation, or of the Second Coming of Christ, I would be atypical — so atypical that if there is any other scholar who agrees wholly with me, I do not know his name. In some ways I am much closer to the Adventist world than are my New Testament colleagues, but in other ways I am much farther away. I must therefore try to avoid injecting my personal and professional idiosyncrasies if this debate is to clarify the main points at issue between Adventists and the other churches.

## I

Let me first indicate four of the unrepresentative ways in which I am sympathetic with the Adventist tendencies:

1. More than most churches today, Adventists accord a very important normative role to the Bible. Moreover, this appraisal is more than an inherited or habitual lip service to a formal, dogmatic assertion of authority; rather, it indicates a readiness to stand with the Bible against the modern “Christian” outlook by allowing thought and practice to be determined by the inspired Scripture.

2. Adventist ontology and cosmology have preserved a place, a realm, for the dwellingplace of God. Adventists are not embarrassed to speak of heaven as a vital locus of action, a reality decisive for the origin and destiny of all things. By contrast, the one-dimensional this-worldliness of secularized

Christianity virtually eliminates the transcendence necessary to eschatological judgment and redemption.

3. Adventist anthropology and soteriology have retained a lively sense of the "Great Controversy" between God and Satan, along with a conviction that all men are drawn into that controversy in such a way that their moral and religious decisions have a bearing on the events of history (and vice versa). For many other Christian groups, the death of Satan, preceding and guaranteeing the death of God, has relativized human decisions and historical processes.

4. Adventist perspectives have preserved a central place for eschatology in which the expectation of final wrath and final grace are not evacuated of meaning; rather, man's whole life is seen to be placed before, under, and within the eternal purposes of God.

33

Against these atypical appreciations of Adventists there are also atypical animadversions. These will perhaps become all too clear in my paper, although I have tried to focus on consensus reactions. Basically, I suppose, my deepest resistance stems from a contrary perception of that reality which is misnamed *history*. How atypical this perception is can be indicated by the fact that no reviewer of my book has yet called attention to the intended meaning of the title.<sup>1</sup> Related to this is an idiosyncratic way of dealing with "apocalyptic" thought forms, language, and literary genres in the Bible. I believe that both prevailing exegetical tendencies (Charles, Bousset, Swete, and others) and the Adventist version of nineteenth-century millennialisms misconstrue the character of biblical prophetism. Inseparable from these two issues is a conception of the Christian gospel which is at the opposite end of the spectrum from Adventists.

This is not the occasion to ventilate my own maverick propensities, however, but to attempt to isolate those elements in Adventist thought which would be least acceptable to most member churches of the National Council. The purpose is not to minimize the existing obstacles but to see and state them sharply. Given the basic attitudes of Ellen G. White as continued in current Adventism, it seems to me that the only course which would respect the integrity in faith of Adventists would be for them to shun ecclesial fellowship with non-Adventists on the Pauline principle (as adapted to this current situation): "Nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for any one who thinks it unclean" (Romans 14:14).

But let me now turn to my major duty: to isolate and to define, for the purpose of discussion, those aspects of Adventist eschatology which would be most contested by other contemporary churches. As Cottrell points out,

these aspects stem mainly from a divergence between basic assumptions (see his Basic Assumptions, Conclusions subsections).

## II

34

Adventists have a tacit conception of the unity of the Bible, expressed in their use of a melange of texts from the Old Testament and the New Testament to explain the same event in recent history. To me, this conception destroys the distinctiveness of the two Testaments, ignores critical attitudes toward the Old Testament which are imbedded in the New Testament, and in effect denies the actuality of the dawning of a new age in Christ. Examples of the literalistic and harmonistic use of scriptural texts can be found everywhere in *The Great Controversy* (in the prophecies asserted to be fulfilled in the French Revolution [chapter 15], in the formulation of the doctrine of the Second Coming [chapter 17], or in the application of predictions to Catholicism and Protestantism). The nonbiblical principle "One saying of the Saviour (or of God) must not be made to destroy another" is used to justify a forced harmonization of texts on a level which could not have been intended in the various original situations.<sup>2</sup> It is by isolating a text (usually a single verse) from its literary and historical context that it can be harmonized with other texts, all of them being interpreted as predicting an event which has taken place or which will soon take place. Although this practice is advanced in the name of the unity of the Bible, it is counterproductive in threatening any sounder view of the unity of the Bible. Thus the method by which Cottrell attempts to prove that Adventist eschatology conforms in all essential aspects to the New Testament pattern — the citation of catenae of texts (as in his subsections 1, 2, 3 of Adventist Understanding of New Testament Eschatology) — is not only unconvincing but does violence to the thought of apostolic authors and to the original intent and function of their writings.

## III

This observation brings into play the clash of assumptions concerning the purpose and nature of the scriptural writings. There is the assumption, for example, that in the interpretation of the book of Revelation literal meanings are to be preferred to symbolic meanings, and that every symbol must, if possible, be translated into conformity with literal passages (see Cottrell's Basic Assumptions subsection). This method accords with the assumption that God's intent in providing inspired Scripture was to provide "information" which he wanted his Church (in the twentieth, not the first,

century) "to have and to understand" (see his Sources of Information subsection).

In the name of the Scriptures I must challenge both these assumptions. They lead in the direction of evacuating all symbols of nonliteral meanings, of forcing the personal and subjective constituents of divine-human conversations into impersonal and objectified data, of turning prophetic visions of heaven into predictive oracles of earthly events, of forcing the parabolic language of Jesus (e.g., Matthew 22, 24, 25) into fantastic stage directions for the eschaton. It is this concentration on objective, literal data which underlies obsessions with the command of Jesus on divorce in preference to his commands on lust and hate, the obsessions with holy days rather than with the principles enunciated by Paul in Romans 14, the obsessions with signs of the end and with literal definitions of creed and office rather than the redefinition of all reality in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. To the student of intellectual history, it is amazing how recent is the development of this preference for the objective, literal meanings of a written Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

#### IV

It was the urgency of the demand to have an authorized and normative interpretation of the written Scripture, an interpretation which would distinguish one church from other churches in Western Christendom, an interpretation which would overcome the apparent anarchy of voices in the inherited canon, which prompted in nineteenth-century America the emergence of three movements — Mormonism, Christian Science, and Seventh-day Adventism. Each of these retained allegiance to the Scriptures as the primary locus of revealed truth. Each established a virtual identity between Scripture and a particular contemporary interpretation of it.

It is not strange, therefore, that the seventh of Cottrell's basic assumptions is the most obvious issue at stake between us. To non-Adventists, this assumption means that in practice the authority which is formally assigned to the Bible is actually assigned to a particular exegete, so that loyalty to God's Word becomes confused with loyalty to one interpretation of it. For example, Ellen White's identification of the demonic trinity of Revelation 13 is accepted by Cottrell as the inspired truth regarding John's message. Only by substituting Mrs. White's interpretation for John's intent could I ever come to affirm this literal interpretation of the demonic trinity as authoritative. That I am unable to do. It would freeze Christian thought and faith to a parochial stage in its development (no less than William Miller's predictions regarding 1844). It would prevent me from penetrating, to the depth,

realities of faith, hope, and love as presented in the Scripture. It would force me into brutal and inhuman treatment of the John, who on Patmos was tortured by his concern for the churches of Asia and was commissioned with a prophetic message for them. John could not have meant to say to them in Revelation 13 and 14 what Mrs. White and Cottrell insist God means to say to us.

## V

36

The Adventist conception of historical events is based on a view of the temporal and the eternal in which the unity of the two appears to be based on the primacy of the temporal. Time becomes everlasting, this is, eternal. There is no change in temporality before Creation or after the parousia. God becomes chained to his own time schedule. His "time" can be — in fact, must be — calculated in terms of human calendars and chronologies. The sequence and measurements of days and years is predetermined and cannot be changed, even though men do not know the day and the hour. The lessons learned in 1844 did not affect in the least the attribution to temporal chronology of an ultimate ontological status. The dating of an event on humanly devised calendars (even such an event as Christ's entry into the heavenly sanctuary) becomes the primary determinant of meaning.

Moreover, each such event appears to be an intervention of deity into "the world of fallen man" (see Cottrell's Approach of the Advent subsection). The relations of God and the world thus become extrinsic and intermittent, since they are conceived more thoroughly in the idiom of nineteenth-century deism than in biblical theism. The decisive advents are seen to be two and only two in number (see his Imminence of the Advent subsection), thus reducing the rich biblical symbol of "coming" to a single literal chronological quotient.<sup>4</sup> It reduces the content of hope to an individual's present relation to a future event, viewed as extrinsic and impersonal (Cottrell prefers a title in the neuter, *the eschaton*, a category that never appears in the Apocalypse and very rarely in the other parts of the New Testament). It removes the future event from any primary, continuing, intrinsic relationship to the dying and rising of Jesus or to the Christian's dying and rising with Jesus. It thus effectively gives to the coming transition a much greater significance than the transition between the ages already accomplished in Christ (e.g., 2 Corinthians 5, 1 Peter 1).

Incidentally, I do not see how Cottrell's interpretation of the end preserves the sense of imminence about which he speaks so warmly. According to his reading of things, before the end certain things must happen: within Protestantism, within Catholicism, and within the political realm of modern

states. Then something must happen in terms of the legal establishment of Sunday. Then will come a universal political-religious repression of those who observe the Sabbath (see Cottrell's subsection 8). If this is true, then as long as the religious and political trends are moving in the opposite direction, as long as the legislative support of Sunday is disappearing, we need not be concerned about "the end of probation" and the nearness of the eschaton. How can the sense of imminence be preserved if the Sunday conspiracy remains a necessary sign of the end (see same subsection)? More important, how can God's presence throughout his creation, how can his will throughout human history be discerned if his relation to the world is made dependent on the fulfillment of this type of prediction regarding the future?

It seems to me that Cottrell's careful insistence on certain signs of the end, as being future only, sharply distinguishes his eschatology from the biblical prophecies and reveals how far his basic perception of history diverges from that of the Bible. The world view of Adventism appears to me to be clearly post-Renaissance in its assumed removal of God from the world, in its assumed unitary time line of history, and in its assumption that truth has to do primarily with dependable, objective information about the various interventions of God in the life of the world.

## VI

What I miss most in the frank listing of assumptions is the mention of any assumption that would indicate a christological or christocentric orientation (or anchorage or control) of thinking about the end. Let me indicate two areas in which I think this silence is disastrous.

1. Much is made of the continuing conflict between God and Satan. I find no evidence, however, that the gospel and passion story of Jesus is used as revelatory of the presence, the power, the stratagems of his satanic majesty. Consequently, there is little awareness of the subtlety with which Satan attacks servants of God by way of their loyalty to the good, or of the insistence on the part of the Messiah and his apostles that Satan's deceptions are to be discerned within the hearts of their followers. To objectify and to postpone the crucial struggle with Satan to a future attack by external enemies on the community which loyally observes the Sabbath encourages a fatal separation of the "great controversy" from the daily battles between right and wrong in the heart of the Christian and in the communal life of the church. The result is the utilization of eschatology to buttress the institutional self-interest of the religious community, to provide it with sanctions for social control, and to reduce the multiple interconnections between eschatology

and daily experience which is characteristic in the Bible of the "sons of the Day."

2. Because the message and passion of Jesus are not used to define the antagonists and the issues in the "great controversy," the pictures of the resolution of that controversy in the final judgment are not informed and permeated by the gospel of Jesus. I must confess a sense of shock and deep revulsion in reading (subsection 10): "It is the 'day' when divine justice, untempered by mercy, metes out to every man his just deserts." This explicit separation of God's grace from his wrath, this limitation of grace to the period before the day of judgment, this portrait of Christ as a judge who divests himself of his willingness to forgive after a certain fixed date, this final victory which is accorded to Shylockian convictions that in the end love and righteousness are irreconcilable, this use of the Second Coming of Christ to fulfill a function so antithetical to the purpose of his first coming, this appeal to that coming as a final vindication of the social attitudes toward the observance of the Sabbath or of Sunday — all this so flagrantly contradicts the scriptural revelation of the irresistible power of God's mercy and of the gracious character of his justice (*dikaio sunē*) that it illustrates the deceptive power of Satan himself. Any eschatology that is placed at the service of a religious community to sustain its righteousness and to assure the condemnation of its enemies becomes demonic, and the ministry of Christ, the great exorcist, again becomes necessary.

## VII

To sum up, the key issue is well stated by Cottrell in his assertion, "In all essential aspects Adventist eschatology conforms to the New Testament pattern." In all frankness, I must indicate my rejection of that assertion. As Cottrell also indicates, the basic reasons for this collision of judgment may be traced to divergent assumptions. I cannot accept his assumptions numbered 4, 5, 6, 7. Moreover, I have indicated some unlisted assumptions which are perhaps even more deep-seated and decisive — presuppositions regarding the nature of God's creation and the implications of his new creation in Christ. I have stated my conception of the issues with undiplomatic bluntness because that is the unpleasant task I was assigned. Let me assure Cottrell and his partners in this dialogue that I would be as ruthless in attacking as unscriptural the de facto eschatology implicit in the world view of American Protestantism. It is intended as a compliment to this group that I have tried to present an analysis of the issues rather than to mount an attack, although what I have said may seem to be attack rather than analysis.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Paul S. Minear, *I Saw a New Earth* (Washington, D. C.: Corpus Books 1968).
- 2 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1950), p. 371.
- 3 W. T. Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (Yale University Press 1967).
- 4 Minear, *Christian Hope and the Second Coming* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1954), chaps. 6, 15.

## Comment

EUGENE H. MALY, Mount Saint Mary's of the West, Cincinnati

In general, I noted the ecumenical tone of the paper and deeply appreciated Cottrell's efforts to present the views of his church as objectively as possible.

The overall eschatological perspective of the paper is one which, I believe, most Roman Catholics would have little difficulty with. We accept the view of a gradually developing "salvation history" reaching a climax in Jesus Christ and being ultimately fulfilled in the Second Coming. We also accept the significant contribution of the Old Testament prophets to the eschatological tension. It is clear, too, that the New Testament Christian community was strongly influenced by the conviction of the imminence of the parousia. I suggest that there is still room for discussion of whether the conviction of the imminence diminished in the latter half of the first century (especially after A.D. 70). But at least it is clear that the conviction of the *certainty* of the coming did not diminish.

I believe that Roman Catholic theology can profit by a greater awareness of the certainty of the parousia. Also, I believe that our eschatological perspective, at least in the manuals, tends to be too individualistic in its orientation. In the past neither community nor cosmic (or secular) eschatology has received the emphasis that both are now receiving and [that] seems to be an



important aspect of the biblical doctrine. Therefore, we can learn much from the Adventist emphases in these areas.

Most of my questions or reservations were raised, at least to some extent, in last year's ecumenical dialogue. Nevertheless, I offer the following observations:

1. While now I understand better the reasoning behind Adventists' insistence on the Sabbath, I hope that the observance of either Saturday or Sunday will not take on the (to me) extreme significance that it has in the past. I do not perceive signs of a union of church and state in enforcing Sunday observance, that is, to the extent that is feared by Adventists. Such signs seem to be diminishing, at least in this country.

2. Biblical scholarship suggests a less predictive element in the writings of the biblical prophets, especially in the writings of the apocalyptists. If the prophets were God's spokesmen to the men of their times, then it is for us to discover the underlying principles of their prophecies and apply them to our time. I realize that this predictive element lies close to the heart of Adventist teaching, but I find it difficult to accept such a precise application of the biblical figures to later generations.

3. Closely connected to the two previous points is the understanding of biblical imagery, particularly in the apocalyptic book of Revelation. While I believe that demythologization can and does take on extreme forms at times in some modern commentators, I do not believe that a literal interpretation of all biblical imagery is in keeping with what the Spirit is saying to us today, or, in fact, with what the Spirit intended for the early Christian Church.

I realize, of course, that similar observations have been made by others. I only make them because, as a Roman Catholic theologian, I have been asked for my reactions. In sum, I would say that while there are obvious aspects of Adventist doctrine with which I cannot agree, I do feel that their strong witness to the Second Coming of the Lord can be a healthy influence in the whole Christian community today. My principal hope would be that our points of difference will not be a cause for further division but a springboard to deeper understanding of God's Word.

I have read with interest the reaction of Paul S. Minear to Raymond Cottrell's paper "The Eschaton: A Seventh-day Adventist Perspective" and feel that a comment or two is in order. First, let me say that Cottrell's statement of the beliefs of most Adventists is handled with his usual thoroughness and care. He has presented the case, moreover, with considerable tact and sensitivity, especially in those areas of belief which are likely to be offensive to non-Adventists.

However, Minear makes a point that should not be taken lightly when he objects to the typical Adventist preoccupation with what he calls "history misnamed" — a "concentration on objective, literal data." I'm not certain that his amazement at how recent is the development of "this preference for the objective, literal meanings of a written Scripture" is well founded, but his apprehension that such an exegesis may prevent one from "penetrating to the deep realities of faith, hope, and love" may not be misplaced.

If Minear thinks that an objective treatment of symbolic material *necessarily* blocks such penetration, however, he is mistaken. Preoccupation with the objective and literal to the exclusion of the deeper meanings they serve is always a danger to an understanding of divine truth. But it is also the case that preoccupation with the meanings to the exclusion of the events which serve them may in the long run set such meanings disastrously adrift.

Adventists should continually ask themselves as they contemplate God's acts in history — including *this* act — What do they mean? What is God trying to tell us by acting in this manner? God's acts in history are windows to reality beyond history.

The heart of the message of the second advent concerns the very essence of the divine reality. The Second Coming concerns a God who "comes" to man. It is a picture of One who takes the initiative in redemption rather than waiting for the lost sheep to find its way home. Even in the story of the prodigal the father goes to meet his son. This is the essential difference between a largely Hellenic concept of reality, in which God is "being," and the Bible. In the biblical eschaton God "comes."

And he comes to the world. God takes his creation seriously. "It is very good," said the Genesis Creator, and that affirmation remains the divine posture. He comes to the world to redeem and restore it — not to supplant it with some other mode of existence. The doctrine of the eschaton should thus shape every Christian's affirmation of the Creation — of the world.

And man's bodily existence is also included in that affirmation. The eschaton involves the resurrection of the body. Material existence is precious to God and should be treated by man with a reverence and respect derived from his affirmation of the Creator and His creation.

In short, what I am saying is that the great event — no longer far off — toward which all creation moves is in the final analysis not just literal history, though it is also that. In it one may grasp a vision of reality itself. What God reveals through this event-window is the truth about himself that lies behind all events, all history. He comes because it is his nature to do so.

This revelation should condition the believer's response to the divine initiative throughout all our time — not just at the end of time. And that response should include expectation and anticipation just as a looked-for event lights the eyes and quickens the steps of the one who waits in hope.

Miner is justified in his concern that one may lose by a certain literalistic posture the "primary, continuing, intrinsic relationship," but that loss need not be realized — and will not be if this, like all God's acts in history, is approached with the proper question. And that question is not primarily *When?* — at least with specificity. Jesus himself said, "It is not for you to know." Nor is the question *How?* We probably wouldn't comprehend the details of that anyway. Rather, the question is *Why?* That is, what truth is God trying to convey by this revelatory act at the end of time?

History is not unimportant, but it is always secondary to the God who enters it from eternity — now as well as at the end of time. The "I will come again" must reinforce and not preclude the "I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." The God who "comes" at the end seeks thereby to instill in us an awareness that he is also already here. The "looking for in hope" can create in us an open anticipation toward the One who is ever present.