

COMMENT:

“The Eschaton”

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As a Seventh-day Adventist minister, I am grateful to you for publishing Raymond F. Cottrell's "The Eschaton: A Seventh-day Adventist Perspective of the Second Coming" and Paul S. Minear's response (SPECTRUM, number one, 1973). I must confess deep sympathy for part of Minear's criticisms; some of his comments under his section VI are all too true. Cottrell cannot be faulted for representing accurately the prevalent contemporary Seventh-day Adventist view of eschatology.

Minear says: "What I miss most . . . is . . . a christological or christocentric orientation (or anchorage or control) of thinking about the end." As one reads Cottrell's "Eschaton," one is alarmed to see that this attitude is not there. Minear adds: "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 portrait of Christ as a judge who divests himself of his willingness to forgive after a certain fixed date, . . . this use of the Second Coming of Christ to fulfill a function so antithetical to the purpose of his first coming . . . flagrantly contradicts . . . the gracious character of his justice."¹

After reading both Cottrell and Minear, I reread the closing chapters of *The Great Controversy* to see if this picture of Christ as merciless judge comes through. Not at all. *The Great Controversy* does not represent Christ's character as changing during these eschatological events.

Rightly understood, *The Great Controversy* represents the wicked as judging and condemning themselves. All the Lord does is to reveal his law "as the rule of judgment . . . to the view of all the inhabitants of the earth." The wicked suffer "horror and despair" because "memory is aroused, the

darkness of superstition and heresy is swept from every mind," and *they judge and condemn themselves*.² No divine voice is heard condemning them. They do the whole job on their own! This statement is fully in harmony with Ellen G. White's profound observation in *Our High Calling*: "God destroys no man. Every man who is destroyed will destroy himself."³

The Great Controversy version agrees also with our Lord's refusal to judge the lost. Jesus says that the Father refuses to have any part in judging mankind and has turned over the entire responsibility to Christ "because he is the Son of man."⁴ Only those whose hearts respond to his love and who believe in him will Christ "judge," and this "judgment" will vindicate them.

This is the only "judgment" Christ will engage in. Of the person who hears his words and "believe[s] not," he says, "I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world."⁵ Here Jesus affirms that the gracious purposes of his First Advent will not be obscured at his Second Advent. It will be "this same Jesus" who will come in the clouds of heaven.⁶ He refuses to judge the wicked. He says, "I judge him not." But Christ also says that the one who "receiveth not my words, *bath* [*italics mine*] one that judgeth him" (*his own conscience*).⁷ These emphatic words of Jesus need close attention. When we find a text that on the surface appears to contradict them, we should give it a second look. Perhaps the text is telling us that at the Second Advent the *wicked* will look at Christ as a condemning judge.

I am disappointed that Adventists would represent to the World Council of Churches that they believe the Second Coming of Christ will be a dangerous event when he will emit a "lethal radiation" to slay the wicked.⁸ However well we may understand the events of eschatology and fit them into proper order, is this a correct view of the character of Christ? What does "lethal radiation" imply? Can this idea be harmonized with what Jesus says in the Gospels? It is true that the wicked will be slain by the brightness of his coming, as Scripture says, but this will not be by "lethal radiation." Their own terrible sense of self-condemnation will be sufficient to kill them. Any assistance the Lord *might* provide will not be "lethal radiation." The Holy Spirit will simply cease to sustain them and to protect them from their well-earned "wages of sin" (Romans 6:23), which is death.

I realize that many contemporary Adventists sincerely believe that "the day of the Lord" is a day "when divine justice, untempered by mercy, metes out to every man his just deserts."⁹ Statements in Scripture or the Ellen White writings that appear to give such an impression should be read more closely in context. I believe that such statements, most of them at least, belong in a category referred to in Revelation. It is the *wicked* who attribute

to the "Lamb" the aspect of hatred and terrible "wrath." To their last breath, they look upon God as a stern, severe judge. The Revelator pictures Jesus at the very moment of his Second Coming as "clothed with a vesture dipped in blood."¹⁰ He is still the "Lamb." What right have we to picture Christ as harsh, cruel, gloating over the fate of his enemies? Recently I heard an evangelist tell his audience that God will personally "devour" the wicked in the last day. (The "from God," *apo tou theou*, of Revelation 20:9 does not appear in some of the important manuscripts.)

Thank God a World Council of Churches representative can tell us that our contemporary presentation of eschatology needs a christocentric appeal. We should have realized it ourselves. However embarrassing it may be to have someone else tell us, we should heed the criticism so gently and kindly given.

The fact is that it is impossible to understand eschatology rightly unless we first understand righteousness by faith in all its tremendous implications. Otherwise, our views will be distorted by a wrong concept of the character of God during the last events. Inspiration tells us that, in this area of righteousness by faith, of all the Seven Churches we are the one most particularly "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked."¹¹ We greatly need a clearer understanding of the Atonement and how its principles relate to eschatological events. The whole idea of a virtually graceless, and therefore Christless, eschatology with "lethal radiation" is not "good news" and, indeed, is out of harmony with gospel principles.

If there is "silence in heaven about the space of half an hour" when the lost meet their fate, we must treat these subjects with great compassion and pathos, "considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted."¹² The fine line that separates the righteous from the wicked may not always be exactly where we think it is!

REFERENCES

- 1 Raymond F. Cottrell, *The eschaton: a Seventh-day Adventist perspective of the Second Coming*, SPECTRUM 5, 1:37, 38 (1973).
- 2 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1950), pp. 639, 640.
- 3 Ellen G. White, *Our High Calling* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1961), p. 26.
- 4 John 5:22, 27.
- 5 John 12:47, 48.
- 6 Acts 1:11.
- 7 John 12:47, 48.
- 8 Cottrell, p. 19.
- 9 Cottrell, p. 19.
- 10 Revelation 6:15, 17; 19:11, 13.
- 11 Revelation 3:17.
- 12 Revelation 8:1, Galatians 6:1.