



## Eschatology Without Excuses | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

I believe the gospel of hope is indispensable. So, when skeptics and know-nothings dismiss it as nothing but a painkiller and an excuse, it sickens me—because I realize they're on to something. A Second Coming church, such as ours, can easily distort hope into an alibi for escape: find a cocoon and wait things out; get on the radio, eat plants, underline the Bible.

Were such a distortion to be truly commonplace, we'd be useless as stumps, or even worse—if we kept on winning converts, we'd be recruiting more people to be the same.

Some of our most influential preachers take us, I'm afraid, in this direction. For them, the present, where we live now, is a parenthesis—a kind of bus stop where, aside from heresy and “soul-winning,” little happens but the waiting. So they barely mention discipleship, nor do they remind anyone to “till and keep” the garden—that, after all, would turn hope into something you *do*, not just something you talk about.

I got to thinking about all this when my graduating class met in late April for a weekend homecoming at Walla Walla University. Many of my classmates showed up; lots of teachers, nurses and physicians, engineers, all people who make *enhancements* to the present world. I realized, as I think people often do at such events, how much I appreciate the time they shared with me back when, how much their wondrous, complicated lives inspire me still. Many are active Adventists. Do their accomplishments rebuke know-nothing dismissals of Christian hope?

Another thing: planners had adopted “Beauty in Expression” as the weekend's theme. I could not remember such a theme at an Adventist General Conference, or in any instance of public evangelism, or in any version of the church's Fundamental Beliefs. Such a theme seemed right for a college campus, but in more conventional settings it would have been, well, innovative.

All this reminded me that if you look for the *convictions*

of a religious community—for its truly *life-changing* beliefs—you can't stop at what preachers or doctrinal statements have to say. You have to look at how people actually *live*—not just in their worship or at the potluck, but also in the workplace or at the mall or on the iPhone.

In that light, it seems to me that one Adventist *conviction*, widely shared, is that God does care about what goes on in the present, and whether it's beautiful or not. “All things bright and beautiful,” says the hymn, “The Lord God made them all.” We even sing that “Emmanuel's ground” yields a “thousand sacred sweets” *before* we reach the “golden streets.”

Not all of us, and perhaps none of us all the time, think the here-and-now is something you just wait out or try to run from. Someone who hears a tornado bearing down on the house would not polish the silverware but would scream at the kids to head for the basement. All of us, at least now and then, polish the silverware.

Still, are *enhancements* of life just distractions from our end-time “warning” work?

When I look at the Bible, I think not. On page one, the purple-headed mountains and divine-image-bearing man and woman, and all the rest that the Creator makes, are called “very good.” Then, a page or so on, God really does tell his human creatures that the garden is for them to “till and keep.” It seems, at least in Genesis, that the world is a good a thing to invest in.

I know someone will say, “But Adam and Eve got into trouble, and now Satan's in control. Now the world is hopeless, bound to get worse and worse.”

But did Abraham get that message? Years after the start of trouble, God tells the founder of Israel: “I will bless you...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Abraham's influence, so says Genesis 12, will help people on *earth* to flourish.

It's true that we're in trouble. The motivation for cutting

the Gospel of hope down to a “final warning message” comes in large part from Jesus’ own words. His great sermon on last things, found in Matthew 24 and 25, declares that before the Kingdom’s final victory, false prophets will arise, and also wars and famines and earthquakes. To avoid torture and death, he tells the disciples, you may have to flee.

Jesus does add, just as we’ve always said, his assurance of final victory. Amid all the hardship and disaster, the Son of Man will flash into view like lightning and gather his followers to himself. Although no one knows the day or hour, it will happen.

But we’re looking at the Bible here, so notice now what Jesus also says: *In the meantime, keep awake—and do your job.* Even when life is hard, do good work. Jesus elaborates on the point with a parable about three servants entrusted with “talents,” or money, while their master is away. One servant is afraid to invest any money; he just buries it for safekeeping. But such a servant—his master uses harsh words—is “wicked and lazy.”

So the proper way to wait for Jesus’ final victory is to do the work God gives. Even when it’s hard, investing in the here-and-now is *God’s plan for our lives.* Long before Jesus’ sermon, Jeremiah told put-upon Jews, then captive in Babylon, to get busy building families and working for “peace”—*shalom*; human well-being—right then and there, in that foreign city (Jeremiah 29:7). Now Jesus, at the center of his end-times speech, summons his followers to be busy in the same way. He has already, remember, inserted the importance of peacemaking into the Beatitudes—and underscored its urgency in the prayer he modeled: “thy will be done, on *earth* as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:9; 6:10).

When Jesus faces questions (Matthew 11) about whether he’s “the one who is to come,” he points to the *good* things that are happening: the healings, the poor having good news brought to them. So if there are (in the language we use) *bad* signs of the times, there are *also* good signs of the times. *There is no iron law that all will get worse.* Jesus did predict suffering; he did say life

would be difficult—but he also spoke eagerly of the good that seemed, with his own ministry, to be gaining traction. The conventional, or stereotypical, Adventist eschatology seems to miss this, even though the Bible is as clear about it as about the Ten Commandments.

My classmates at Walla Walla have done many things to enhance the here-and-now. And part of the reason we enjoyed our time together is that all weekend, musicians and artists gave expression to beauty as if on cue from their very Maker. They seemed to know, by instinct or the study of God’s word or both, that God never said, “My Son’s first coming fell flat and nothing’s changed. I’ll get it right the *second* time.”

All this has helped me form a thought that’s not new at all. It’s that although the Second Coming really does provide the hope we need, that hope is no excuse for escapism; it’s a stimulus to urgency. It tells us what will *last*—Jesus will—and thus what goals, values and passions are worth embracing today. So when eschatology is faithful to God’s word, it underscores what Martin Luther King called “the fierce urgency of Now.” It’s motivation to get busy with what matters now, *good* signs of the times. Hope is something you *do*.

A world doomed to go downhill, a world where we might as well bury our resources as use them for good ends, would be no place for moral aspiration, nor even for Adventist faith. How, I ask you, can the Second Coming happen if God can make no good difference now? ■

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