

## Heralds of Hope (Titus 2:11-15)

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### Contemporary Attitude: Cynicism

The contemporary attitude which provides the background for this sermon is cynicism: defined as a sneering disbelief in sincerity, in the straight line, the possibility of undeviating adherence to truth and doctrine, the "unreligion of the age. . . a systematic hunting down of all settled convictions."<sup>1</sup> Cynicism is a symptom of the anxiety of emptiness, dread of the "abyss of nothingness."<sup>2</sup> A cynic is a chronic critic. Cynicism laps at faith like waves on a seashore, eroding hope.

I begin by telling two stories separated by 25 years of time, but united by the loss of faith in the imminent return of Jesus that they illustrate.

The first took place during Advent season, the four Sundays preceding Christmas, in my first year of ministry in the Lutheran Church. Even though they precede the celebration of Christ's birth, the historic pericope lessons focus on His second Advent.

So I preached a series of sermons on the second coming of the Lord. Following the last one a lady shook my hand with tears rolling down her face, and said, "Oh, thank you pastor! We haven't heard anything about the second coming of Jesus for years!"

It made me glad to know that a starving soul was fed with spiritual bread. I was happy and satisfied, feeling I had fulfilled my calling as a herald of hope.

Twenty five years later, as a Seventh-day Adventist minister and Seminary professor, I heard an Adventist educator say that because of the "delay" in Christ's return, we can no longer live on the edge of the second Advent. It is too emotionally and psychologically wearing. He was applauded by his audience!

It made me sad, and I wondered about the "Adventist" Church I had joined. You see the second coming of the Lord has always been the climax of personal and world history for me, one of the appeals of Adventism. Faith in the imminent and visible return of Jesus had eroded in my former Church to the point where believers heard little or nothing about it anymore, but their hearts yearned to hear it again! Replaced theologically with realized eschatology, the preaching of Christ's visible return virtually disappeared.

Is faith in His soon return eroding among us as well? Are there those among us too, who yearn to hear it preached again? Who will not hear it unless we believe the Bible and preach the Bible, rather than the opinions and philosophies of human kind.

What shall become of us? Are we doomed to become professional mourners, lamenting a demised faith? Or shall we again be the kind of heralds of hope that brought this movement into existence? What shall become of us, and what message we shall preach, is not determined by the circumstances of history or culture, but by the decisions we make about the Bible and its message.

### An Apostolic Appeal to Adventists

Hidden in the little New Testament letter called TITUS is what appears to be a summary of the Adventist understanding of salvation. This short passage is a portrait of what should occupy the SDA Church, its leaders, pastors, and lay members, during the interim.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It 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 Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you (Titus 2:11-15).

**God's Grace and Salvation.** "The grace of God" and "the glorious appearing" form the frame around this portrait, providing its boundaries and dimensions. "Grace" is not only God's favorable disposition toward sinners, toward the suffering. It goes beyond treating people with kindness and mercy. It is not just an attitude on God's part, it is His divine power made available to the believer for victory over sin and the imperfections of character. Its goal is to "redeem us from all wickedness and to purify . . . a people [who are] eager to do what is good."

Our Lord Jesus Christ has not only assumed responsibility for our past, but for our present and future as well. Grace provides power to fulfill God's purpose, both individually and corporately. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). The believer's heart is "strengthened by grace" (Heb 13:9). Taught to say "No!" to ungodliness and worldly passions.

Salvation means that the sinner is justified by grace through faith, and then by the same grace and through the same faith is sanctified, trained to live a self-controlled, Spirit-controlled life.

**"The Glorious Appearing" Already Begun.** Have you ever noticed people at an airport or train station being reunited after a long separation? The party waiting cannot stand still while the one arriving approaches. They begin to run toward each other.

"Parousia" (coming, advent) can mean that which is in the process of coming. We are not waiting for something that has not yet begun to happen. The wheels are already turning. The whole sweep of salvation history must be kept in view when we think about the "glorious appearing."

The glorious appearing began when God decided to save mankind, and it has been unfolding in prophetic fulfillment and rhythm, in the incarnation, in Calvary, in the resurrection, ascension, heavenly ministry of Christ, and the pre-Advent judgment. The climax, the culmination, the decisive moment, will be when we see Jesus. God has not changed His mind about the return of Jesus. He IS coming! He is COMING! He is on the way! The interim is only perceived as "delay."

The interim is not a delay in the sense of an indefinite postponement; everything will happen according to God's timetable. It

is not a period of anxiety and idleness, but of expectant, actively responsible waiting. While God's people are engaged in finishing the work of proclaiming the Gospel, He is not finished with His people yet. As Jesus our Lord is on the way, we too are on the way. Moving toward Him "with upright and godly lives," as He moves toward us.

### Satan's War with the Church

But we have an antagonist who does not mind so much what we believe as long as we don't practice it. He is a master at misrepresentation, deception and distortion, and is pleased when we emulate him. He is identified in Revelation as "the dragon," "an enormous red dragon" (12:3), and is identified as "Satan, who leads the whole world astray" (12:9).

**Satan's Strategy: Conflict.** Satan wages war. His strategy is conflict. It started in heaven when "The dragon and his angels fought" with "Michael and his angels" (12:7). "He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him" (12:9). "He is filled with fury" (12:12b), and "pursued the woman" (12:13). "The dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" [the remnant Church] (12:17).

The conflict began in heaven and continues on earth until Jesus comes, and "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Rom 16:20). "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12).

*Moral conflict.* We could recite a sad litany of moral and ethical sins of the flesh that prevail in our society attributed to the dragon: drugs, fornication, adultery, homosexuality, AIDS, crime, etc. But how does the dragon make war with the human intellect? How does he pursue the theologian? Through the mind, of course. A fruitful field, especially if he manages to produce skepticism and cynicism about the glorious appearing.

*Theological conflict.* Could it be that ideas such as theological pluralism, historical-critical theology, adaptation hermeneutics, truth as confessional, the Bible a human witness rather than



revelation, separation of Christ from biblical history, devaluation of the past (see Blanco, *JATS*, Vol 2, No 2, p.71), therapeutic as opposed to doctrinal preaching, are intellectual evidence of the dragon's furious pursuit of the church?

The Christian faith is not hostile to theology, only to theologians who think they are wiser than the inspired sages such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Paul, John the revelator. Wiser even than Jesus Himself. In an age of pluralism theology can be likened to a plastic bag designed to hold only fluid.

**Varied Attacks on the Church.** *Human reason exalted.* The strategic objective of our ferocious antagonist is to render the Church innocuous. He will use every means available to gain that objective. One of his tactics is to convince the intellect that it is wiser than inspired revelation. Speaking metaphorically, the tail of the dragon still sweeps stars from the sky (Rev 12:4).

*Flesh Indulged.* Another tactic is to persuade believers that while they may believe they are justified by faith, the flesh is overpowering, cannot be controlled, and may therefore be indulged. Which is why this passage is at odds with a contemporary culture that rejects all restraints and parameters (contemporary Americans "believe in the green light").<sup>3</sup> This text puts us under discipline. The discipline of grace, of the Spirit, of self-control.

Christian believers, empowered by grace, are able to say NO! to "ungodliness and worldly passions." They are empowered "to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age."

You have heard the common response to this good news: "But that's not the real world." But for believers the kingdom of God *IS* the real world, and God is teaching and training them to live in that real world! He is redeeming His people "from all wickedness" not just by declaring them righteous because of Calvary, but by empowering them by grace to live righteously in practice. Adventists call this imputed and imparted righteousness. "Now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light" (Eph 5:8). "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness" (5:11).

**Role of Christian Discipline.** These spiritual characteristics cannot be produced without the pain of discipline, for they are ferociously resisted by the fallen nature. Discipline, the spouse of

growth and character development, is seen by contemporary culture as a great evil. But the Word of God says,

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness (Hebrews 12:7-11).

To come under discipline does not "meet my need" for liberation, say those who understand "liberation" as absolute freedom. Even here one can wrongly appeal to the Bible, which says that if Christ made us free, we are free indeed. Understood as freedom from all law, from all restraints, from all divine demands and expectations—no wonder the mind of the human theologian invented the idea of realized eschatology!

But the dragon must be resisted. Michael and his angels engaged in combat with him and the dragon lost for "he was not strong enough" (Rev 12:8), heaven was cleansed. Michael took the initiative and so must God's people! Weapons: "belt of truth," "breastplate of righteousness," "gospel of peace," "shield of faith," "helmet of salvation," "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God," and "pray in the Spirit" (Eph 6:14ff).

Are we giving up the fight? Are we actually surrendering to a defeated enemy? "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (Rev 12:11).

**Role of Christian Hope.** Hope, too, is a formidable weapon in this contest. Seventh-day Adventists are HERALDS OF HOPE!

Hope is the positive mode of waiting for the future. It is the opposite of anxiety, a negative mode of waiting for the future. Because anxiety is intolerable, it is repressed and diverted. Looking into the abyss cannot be endured, so time is filled with the most exciting impressions possible.

Happiness in the present is produced by hope regarding the future. Without such hope there is only asphyxiating unpredictability. When we do not know, there is anxiety. Faith needs hope like the body needs oxygen. The biblical message of the "glorious ap-

pearing" is plunged, by divine grace, into the boiling cauldron of mankind's anxiety! The last word of the Savior heard by the world is not "Why have you forsaken me" (Matt 27:46)?— Rather, it is "Yes, I am coming soon" (Rev 22:20). He is on the way!

Speaking from within his own evangelical tradition, Helmut Thielicke said: "We do not know what is coming, but we know who is coming."<sup>4</sup> That's a half truth as far as we are concerned. We know both the Who and the what! Because we know Who is coming we are not anxious about what will come.

Hope is sustained by the power of grace to forgive and make new. The power of the coming Christ is revealed in the power of the indwelling Christ—"Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1:27).

### "The Things You Should Teach"

"These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you." Encourage the faithful and rebuke the unfaithful in the authority of the Word of God! Though we may be despised by Satan and the unbelieving world, we must not let them sway us, deter us, from believing and preaching the blessed hope!

We are not living on the edge of the second advent, we are living in the midst of its fulfillment! Our confession of faith is "MARA-NATHA!" Salvation is completed by Christ's return. It concludes what began in the mind of God. The remnant is the seed of the future. Therefore, it is imperative that the faith of the remnant concerning the prophetic unfolding of the future be firm and unwavering.

We are not waiting for Godot! Samuel Becket's play ends with Godot nowhere in sight, and without the assurance he even exists. "I am coming soon!" is not an ambiguous announcement. We have a Lord who speaks! "What He says will happen is in the process of happening because the Word He speaks is a creative word and brings into being what is declared."<sup>5</sup> The light of His coming will drive us from our hiding places into the world as light reflectors and as salt. To speak the language of hope.

We have the rare privilege of addressing the world with words that reveal divine truth and the reality of our belief that all is not lost. Jesus is coming! And He will make all things right just as He

will make all things new. We may live in the same world of anxiety but we need not share in the same gloom and cynicism. We are Christian realists who know only too well the situation in which the world exists, but who know also that Jesus is near. We are upward lookers! Such hope demonstrates itself in a missionary outlook on life.

Ours is a delirious expectation! To share it and express it is to speak in the language of hope. Jesus will have the last Word!

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Nihilism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 117.

<sup>3</sup> Rieff, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Thielicke, p. 147.

<sup>5</sup> C. Raymond Holmes, *The Last Word* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), p. 17.