

# *The Prevailing Confusion in the Interpretation of Prophecy*

REV. W. S. HOOTON, M.A., B.D.

*(A reply to Eusebes lament in the "Record" about this confusion.)*

**T**HERE is very great need for the sifting of facts from theories, in the matter of the interpretation of prophecy in general, and of Second Advent teaching in particular. Much confusion is caused by the existence of different "schools" of prophetic study; still more by the confident assertions made by some who are attached to these schools, with regard to what are, at all events as yet, matters of theoretical belief and not of ascertained fact.

It should not prove to be an impossible task to distinguish between facts which are so clearly revealed as to be unmistakable under any reasonable view of the meaning of Holy Scripture, and interpretations which are not universally accepted by those who acknowledge its full authority and are willing to receive it in its plain meaning. It is well known that men equally faithful to the Word of God, and equally convinced of the plain facts to which we refer, are completely divided as to the interpretation and exposition of many passages. This is surely sufficient to present an unanswerable case for avoiding anything like a confident dogmatism regarding details of interpretation, as well as for a charitable attitude towards any from whom we may be disposed to differ in respect of such details; and, above all, for shunning anything like the erection of a standard and test of orthodoxy regarding them.

So far as these matters refer to the Second Coming of our Lord, we do well to pay heed to a story which has been told of the late Frances Ridley Havergal. It is stated that on one occasion she remarked that when He does come, no one will be able to say to his neighbour, "There! I told you so!" His Coming will be so wonderful, and so unexpected in one way or another, that all human anticipations will be exceeded, and more or less rendered nugatory by the event.

## DANGERS ARISING FROM THE CONFUSION

The dangers which have arisen from the confusion referred to are very manifest amongst us. Many have been repelled from the study of prophecy because of the controversies which have been aroused. They know that confident predictions have been falsified, and they have witnessed the un-Christian spirit of bitterness which has too often been imported into discussions, in the religious Press or elsewhere. Undeniably, the prophetic Books of the Bible are among the most difficult, and the natural indolence of human nature is easily reinforced by the plea that it is evident that nothing definite can be discovered as to their actual meaning. It is happily true that date-fixing has fallen into wide discredit among students, partly as the result of painful experience ; but the general Christian public takes more account of the discredited forecasts of the past than of the sobered attitude of the present ; and it is, unhappily, true that dogmatism about particular theories does *not* tend to diminish, though it may be hoped that there is less bitterness.

A still worse danger is that many preachers and teachers are probably hesitating to speak about matters of prophecy, whether because of their difficulty, or through fear of contradicting someone's particular views. This is most serious when it leads to silence with regard to the Lord's Return itself. And how truly unreasonable it is to plead that because confusion exists on matters of detail, it is better to avoid the subject altogether—or, if not actually to offer such a plea, at all events to allow oneself to be consciously or unconsciously moved to maintain silence by a sense of uncertainty amid confusing interpretations, or even by the fact of such existing confusion ! The Second Coming of our Lord is a matter as plainly revealed as anything else in connection with His work. There have been confusing discussions about everything connected with His Person and His work. We do not hesitate to proclaim the Incarnation because Arius or Apollinarius long ago, or Modernists now-a-days, have raised intellectually or spiritually confusing issues regarding that vital doctrine. The Atonement, again, is unhappily as much as anything the subject of confusing theories : but it is to be hoped that none of us would therefore recommend a silent attitude towards the central feature in the work of the Saviour for our redemption. Or consider the

Resurrection, and its supreme importance in our witness in succession to apostolic testimony : yet spiritually confusing indeed are the current theories and discussions on this great subject ! But when the Return of our Lord is mentioned, it is pleaded that there is so much difference of opinion in connection with it.

Well, whatever may be said about the absurdity of extreme insistence upon disputed points of prophetic study and interpretation, any such absurdity is capped by the unreasonableness of *that* plea. Unreasonable as it would be at any time to make any one exception among leading points of Biblical doctrine, equally revealed and equally controverted, surely it is most of all unreasonable at the very moment when, through the unprecedented developments in world affairs, the fact of our Lord's Return is perhaps the very doctrine which needs most to be emphasized. This is not the moment to maintain what has truly been called " a tragic silence," upon so urgent a matter. What shall we say to our Lord, if He returns and finds people unprepared for His Coming *because we have never told them about it ?*

### SCHOOLS OF INTERPRETATION

Not much need be said, in a paper of this kind, with regard to the main lines of interpretation which are adopted by the different " schools " of thought on the subject. Not only are they doubtless generally known, but it is very far from our purpose to discuss the different theories, or to attempt to decide which, among them, embody facts. We wish, rather, to emphasize the need of bearing witness to the clearly revealed and agreed facts, in distinction from disputed theories.

It is well, however, to remind ourselves that the main difficulty, so far as Evangelicals are concerned, arises from the strong support given, on one side or the other, to the " Historical " and " Futurist " interpretations. Not many Evangelicals, probably, adhere to the " Preterist " view, which refers the Book of the Revelation mainly to the past, as given for the benefit of those who had to go through the terrible early persecutions. Doubtless it had a message for those times, and a very strengthening message ; but we shall scarcely think that this can be nearly all. In distinction

from this view, interpreters on the Evangelical side regard the Book, according to their adhesion to one or other of the two methods before mentioned, either as in the main a progressive revelation of the course of history throughout the Christian era, or as in the main referring to events which have to be fulfilled in the future.

It should be added, however, that the number of those who hold that the Book may have its fulfilment along all the above lines, in different ways, is probably not negligible ; and that a further method of exposition regards the Book as designed to enforce spiritual and practical lessons, bearing upon the trials of believers, their sources of strength and consolation under those trials, and the sure victory of the Redeemer over all the forces of devilish and worldly opposition. This is an aspect of the Book which must surely not be neglected, whatever may be our views on the different lines of interpretation in other respects. It is an aspect which is supplementary to them all, and does not necessarily contradict any one of them.

### DEFINITELY REVEALED FACTS

In all this, we have been referring to one Book of the Bible alone, because it is with regard to that Book that the divisions have mainly arisen. But the Second Advent of our Lord is a subject of frequent and reiterated reference in Scripture, and especially in His own teaching and in that of His apostles.

The subject of prophecy in general is, of course, a wider one. But the main questions arise regarding events connected with the Second Advent. It is in this matter that the most urgent need arises for the separation of facts from theories.

*What, then, are the unquestionable facts of Divine revelation regarding the Return of our Lord ?*

It is a fact that He is coming back in personal and visible reality. This is repeatedly declared or implied. We will not attempt any full list of references ; but here are two which are emphatic—Acts i. 11 ; Rev. i. 7.

It is a fact that His Coming will be at a time of world unrest and terror (Luke xxi. 25-28).

It is a fact that the world will be as preoccupied with its own affairs, as in the days of visitations long past

(Luke xvii. 26-30). (It is very remarkable that our Lord selected for reference, not the unquestionable enormities of iniquity in the days of Noah and Lot, but the complete obsession of their contemporaries with secular pursuits not unlawful in themselves—just as the great sin of our own day is “leaving God out”).

It is a fact that His Coming will therefore be quite unexpected by the world at large: apparently it is even foreshadowed that it will be unexpected also by the Church (Matt. xxiv. 43, 44; 2 Pet. iii. 3, 4).

It is a fact that He is coming suddenly as well as unexpectedly. It will be no silent and unrecognized approach, as in the case of the First Advent (Matt. xxiv. 27; 1 Cor. xv. 52).

It is a fact that the day or the hour of His appearing is known to no man (Matt. xxiv. 36; Mark xiii. 32).

It is a fact that He is coming to receive His own people. This is definitely revealed and must be held—apart from all controversies as to what is involved in it (John xiv. 3; 1 Thess. iv. 16-18; 2 Thess. ii. 1).

It is a fact that He is coming to demand of all an account (Matt. xxv. 14-30; Rom. xiv. 10; 2 Cor. v. 10).

It is a fact that He is coming to right all wrong (Matt. xiii. 41-43).

It is a fact that He will set up a Kingdom which will never be overthrown. This, like one of the facts mentioned above, has been interpreted along the lines of different expositions; but the fact itself is unquestionable, and can be proclaimed without entering upon any such matters (2 Tim. iv. 1; Rev. xi. 15-18; xix. 11-16).

Here, then, are ten clear and positive facts of Divine revelation, at least, regarding unfulfilled prophecy. What is to hinder us from proclaiming them, without dogmatizing as to details which are not so clear?

## AN EXAMPLE OF DIVIDED INTERPRETATION

Now let us turn from facts to theories. Not that one has any intention of attempting any such summary in this matter as the above—imperfect as that may itself perhaps be. It will be more helpful to take one example—one that is especially prominent as a cause of difference, and, it is to be

feared, sometimes even of bitterness. And I will try to practise what I preach, and to avoid undue dogmatism.

Christ our Lord is coming, we have just seen, to receive His own people. That is certain. But some hold that He will remove them before a great final tribulation; others that the Advent is one single majestic manifestation at the close of whatever troubles may yet have to be witnessed or even suffered. In the former case, the Coming is understood as having two *stages*: He is coming, it is said, first *for* His people and then *with* them. Under the latter interpretation, the Coming is regarded as having two *aspects*—deliverance and rest for those "in Christ," judgment for others.

There is perhaps no question regarding which the criticism is more called for, that passages are quoted as conclusive which are in reality far from being so. For example, one will not seldom hear the great passage 1 Thess. iv. 13-18, referred to as if it could only refer to the former view. But, when we go "to meet" a friend, we do not stay with him at the place where we meet him: there is a striking parallel in Acts xxviii. 15, where the same word is used, and Paul's friends may be presumed to have returned, with him, immediately to Rome. (The very slight difference in Greek construction can scarcely be held to affect the parallel.) So, may it not just as reasonably be urged that the passage suggests the very reverse, viz. that the saints will be caught up to meet the Lord and to return with Him immediately to the earth?

The passage, of course, would harmonize with the other interpretation, if it can be convincingly supported in other ways. For this purpose, two passages are often relied upon—Luke xxi. 36 and Rev. iii. 10. Now these passages *may* mean what they are thus supposed to mean; and one may well hesitate, especially when things so amazing are already taking place, dogmatically to declare that what is known as a "pre-tribulation rapture" is not foreshadowed by them. But it is a fact that close consideration does make it appear that these two passages may also signify being "kept safely through and out of" such a period of trouble. Though the language is perhaps not exactly parallel, it is worth noting that Jer. xxx. 7 speaks of Jacob being "saved out of" trouble which has clearly to be endured.

On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to suppose

that the "rest" and the "affliction" which are linked in 2 Thess. i. 7 (R.V.) as to be experienced "at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of His power in flaming fire" are to be separated by an interval; or even that the "rest" which is promised in this passage is at a different period from the "rapture" in 1 Thess. iv. And further, the view that there are two stages rather than two aspects of the Second Advent involves assigning to the word "elect," in Matt. xxiv. 22, 24, 31, a meaning different from that which it ordinarily bears in Scripture—a meaning in which it actually occurs in the same Gospel, in the record of words spoken by our Lord, apparently on the very same day (Matt. xxii. 14, Greek). Can this be thought likely? In the same great prophetic context, the remarkable Greek verb for "shall gather together" (Matt. xxiv. 31) corresponds with quite arresting exactness to the noun used for "our gathering together" in 2 Thess. ii. 1—which unquestionably refers to the "rapture."

It is not our purpose dogmatically to decide between the two views. But it is right to urge that the matter cannot be settled by quoting passages whose application is itself not certain; and that whenever personal opinions are expressed, they should be expressed as such, and not as dogmatic facts. It is far more important that we should consider whether we are ready for our Lord's Coming and earnestly desiring it, and also whether we are doing what He calls us to do in the time which remains, than whether this or that interpretation is correct, in a matter which may purposely be concealed from us. A speaker at a Prophecy Investigation Society's meeting, not long ago, strikingly quoted a little-known Scripture passage—"It is the glory of God to conceal a thing" (Prov. xxv. 2). If He should call us to pass through tribulation, we shall only be following in the steps of His saints in all ages—and elsewhere in this age. He will give grace, as He always has done, for whatever may have to be endured: may He not also shield us from its fierceness, if that be His will?

Perhaps it may just be mentioned that a suggestion has been made that there may be many *stages* in reducing a rebel world to order *after* the Advent of our Lord, viz. stages of judgment. One wonders whether this can in any way indicate a clue.

## A PRACTICAL REMEDY

In the light of all that has been said, what is the true line to take in Advent preaching and teaching? How shall we best serve our Lord's purpose, in regard to a matter so especially important for a world in chaos?

Let us begin our answer to this question by asking another. *What is our object in Advent testimony?* Is it not that the message may be used on the one hand to awaken sleepers, and on the other to purify the life and hope of the believer, and to stir his evangelistic zeal? Surely this purpose is most likely to be attained by proclaiming the sure facts of Divine revelation, of which we have already spoken, and by impressing the practical and spiritual lessons which are linked with the subject. What need is there, in ordinary Advent preaching, to enter upon disputed details which may divide (if they do not even mislead) rather than edify?

It is a very striking feature of the Advent references in the New Testament that they are so characteristically linked with *practical lessons*. We find this feature markedly in our Lord's teaching on the subject, and also in that of the Apostles. How urgently He impressed upon His followers the Advent call to *watchfulness*, and to *faithfulness*, and to *loving service* (the three sections of Matthew 25 illustrate these three lessons, following the same three-fold practical application, in chapter xxiv. 42-51, of the prophetic discourse in verses 4-41). As examples from St. Paul, St. Peter, and St. John, consider the deeply practical messages of Rom. xiii. 11-14; 2 Pet. iii. 11-14; 1 John ii. 28; iii. 3.

The trouble is that Advent addresses are sometimes speculative rather than practical. This is the very antithesis of Bible treatment of the subject. It encourages the dangerous tendency in human nature to be deeply "interested" in the subject, without being spiritually moved, or rendered more holy and more zealous in evangelistic and other Christian activity. Just as every good thing can be misused, there is a risk lest Christian people should become so absorbed in the speculative side of the subject that they spend time upon it which should be devoted to seeking for souls. And there is even a danger lest prayer and work alike should be paralysed by the thought that the Lord Himself is coming, and will put all right. But what of those who are unprepared

to meet Him, and whom we might be used to rescue from their peril? And what of the still unevangelized areas of the world's surface?

Another legitimate and profitable topic is the indication of any special signs that the Lord's Coming may be drawing very near. Doubtless there is some danger of unwarranted speculation here also: nevertheless, it is a fact that He Himself blamed the Jews for *not* discerning the signs of His First Advent, that He also gave us certain signs of His Second Advent which must be similarly intended for our careful attention, and that those who were awake to the signs of His First Coming received a special blessing. Truly, there are sufficient indications in this distracted world, and in the almost equally distracted Church, to turn our attention very markedly to certain passages, e.g. in Luke xxi; 2 Timothy iii, and 2 Peter iii.

To avoid misunderstanding, it is well to add that there is no intention of suggesting that disputed interpretations should not be the subject of discussion (in all tolerance and charity) at proper times and in proper places. The Prophecy Investigation Society, for example, affords an admirable opportunity for these discussions, in an atmosphere of quiet charity, such as is more easily maintained at gatherings of that nature. But the pulpit or the platform is not the best place for discussions which may confuse or disturb hearers. Private study of these questions is of course also profitable. Certainly all Scripture is written for our learning; though, if even Daniel was not allowed to understand it all at once, we must not expect to do so either. Certainly it should be studied at appropriate times and in appropriate ways. And, even then, it must be remembered that adding to what is revealed is as sternly forbidden as is taking away from it (Rev. xxii. 18, 19).

### THE ADVENT TESTIMONY MOVEMENT

As is well known, much attention has been given to these matters during the past twenty years or so—especially since the foundation of the Advent Testimony and Preparation Movement. Indeed, the remarkable developments in world affairs have been quite sufficient to arrest the attention of Bible students to this aspect of Bible teaching. A great

amount of literature has been pouring from the Press on the subject of prophecy, and many gatherings have been organized, in one way or another, for its consideration.

To what extent have these gatherings fulfilled the practical purpose of which we have spoken? It is a difficult question to answer. Let us take, for example, the most widely known of such organizations, the movement named above. It has done good service in many ways. It has kept the subject prominently before the Christian public, testifying faithfully to the main fact of the personal Return of our Lord in literal reality, indicating signs of the probable nearness of His Return, and sounding the call to holiness of life and to zeal in evangelizing the unready, as well as the urgent need for awakening and repentance. These, as we have seen, are the main points which need to be stressed, and there can be no doubt that the movement has been blessed to the conversion and fuller sanctification of many. Meanwhile, it has carefully avoided the snare of "date-fixing." In such a case, criticism must indeed not be too lightly offered.

Yet there is one matter with regard to which one may venture to offer a suggestion—with all due respect for the earnest devotion of the promoters, and with full recognition of what has been accomplished through the movement. The platform is at present entirely in the hands of one school of thought. Many feel that it should be open to any who are prepared to take the practical and spiritual line of Advent testimony which is mentioned above.

There are certainly grave difficulties in the way. In order to avoid misrepresentation, I have made careful enquiries, and have received information from an unquestionably authoritative quarter. Apparently the movement was founded with the full intention of thus including members of all schools of interpretation, and the result, in practice, proved to be the very confusion which has been the bane of all efforts to keep this important topic before the public. It seems to have been concluded that there was only one way of avoiding this evil. *But is there really only one way?*

Would it not be better to make it absolutely binding upon speakers to adopt only the spiritual and practical line, and to invite as speakers all who are prepared thus to testify to the personal Return, its probable nearness, and the call to repentance, holiness, and earnest Christian service? That

would be an impressive demonstration of unity amid diversity, and we might see the windows of heaven opened with even greater blessing than has yet attended the movement.

Especially might this be the result in one particular direction. It is very doubtful to what extent *the outside world* is at present being reached by these gatherings. There may certainly be a number of instances of the kind, but as a rule they seem to be attended mainly by an inner circle who are already convinced of the truth of the Lord's Return and of the importance of the subject. This is not the primary purpose of *Advent testimony*. Greater unity in actual testimony (as distinct from entering into details) might lead to greater blessing, wider awakening, a more real "preparing the way of the Lord."

There is one other drawback to the present arrangement. It means that the particular line of interpretation which is adopted by those who take part *can* be freely expounded from the platform; so that, as a matter of fact, details which are not universally accepted by many devoted Bible students are dogmatically declared, at certainly some of the gatherings. That is to say, controversy is excluded by giving free scope to one particular line of controversial opinion.

Surely it is legitimate to suggest that, however great the service already rendered by the movement, the fullest measure of divine blessing might be granted in response to a united agreement, on the part of members of all schools of interpretation, to leave disputed details for other occasions, and to reserve public addresses for pure testimony and spiritual appeal.

### CONCLUSION.

The essence of the situation is this. Here is a world in chaos; the Church of Christ torn by dissensions and crippled by inconsistencies; and a message from Divinely revealed truth which is urgently needed for just such a time as this, but is, in the main, effectively reaching only the people who presumably (though by no means necessarily) need it least. At all events, vast numbers of those who unquestionably do need it most are either not getting it, or—speaking generally—are "put off" by the prevailing confusion in interpretation of non-essential details. The pity of it!

One other point will form a fitting conclusion to our thoughts, recalling us to the heart of the whole matter, as of everything else in connection with the Christian revelation. Advent study, and the study of prophecy in general, can only be profitable in so far as it draws us nearer to Christ in personal devotion. It is possible to be so absorbed in prophetic matters as to make *them* the centre, instead of *Him*. Is *He* the Centre of our Advent hope? Certainly He was, for St. Paul (Titus ii. 13, and many other passages).

Are we looking for His Coming as a deliverance from trouble, or as a preliminary to reunion with departed friends, or even as the solution of a needy world's distress—all of them, in their place, lawful objects of hope—or are we looking for *His* triumphant vindication, and for *Himself* as the Centre of our heaven? In a word, as we think of His Coming, are we thinking of *it*, or are we looking for *Him*? There is probably enough in that question to call for heart-searching in most of us.

#### ADDENDUM

(on the above comparison of Luke xxi. 36 with Rev. iii. 10 :)

It may legitimately be objected that the Greek in Luke xxi. 36 suggests, more definitely than in Rev. iii. 10, complete "escape" from the *experience* of tribulation. But it does not seem impossible that it *may* mean, in that case, deliverance from the experience of what others have to suffer, and thus being brought safely through a terrible period without such acute suffering.