

The 1888 Message and the Delay in Christ's Coming

by David L Wilson

Jesus will come again. The question that Jesus asks is not whether He will come again, but rather, will He find faith on earth when He comes again? This latter question is a very real and valid one. Ultimately, Jesus will come, whether or not, He finds faith in the earth. However, I trust you would like to join me, in determining that, by God's grace, we shall not disappoint Jesus by failing to meet Him in faith, when He comes. I believe that Jesus will indeed, through the power of His grace alone, find faith in the earth at His coming. That is certainly God's desire. It is what Jesus died to accomplish.. It is the very purpose of His closing work in the heavenly sanctuary. God forbid that He should be disappointed.

The Bible clearly reveals God's plan for faith to be found in the earth at Jesus' coming, as a corporate experience of an end-time church. "Here is the patience of the saints, Here are they that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." Through this living witness, the gospel is to go to all the world. Jesus plainly revealed to His ecclesia, the called out ones, that this witness of the gospel was the condition of Jesus coming'. See Matthew 24:14. Herein lies the secret of the delay in Christ's coming. To ascribe this delay solely to God's long-suffering love, which desires all to come to repentance is to miss the point. God has only had to suffer this long with the continued degradation of His creation in sin, because His people have refused to let His Word accomplish in them the transformation which would have effectually testified to the world the amazing love of Christ and His power to save from sin. The call to repentance could and would have gone to every man in so profound a way, as to give all the best opportunity to respond to the gospel in "repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ", if we would have allowed Him to work in us what is well pleasing in His sight. In this context, the church clearly has a role in preparing the way for the coming of the Lord. The Holy Spirit empowered proclamation of the full gospel in the work of the latter rain will prepare the grain for the harvest. This is a work which God has delegated in His wisdom to the church. It is therefore clear that inasmuch as the church is composed of human beings, whom God has given the power to think and to choose, that this work being accomplished is conditioned upon the cooperation of God's people with the work which Christ wishes to administer in his office as our High Priest; that through cooperation with Him, by accepting and proclaiming the third angel's message in the power of the Holy Spirit, God has placed it within the power of His people to extend before the world the convicting work of the Holy Spirit and thus hasten the coming of the Lord. By way of simple contrast, a failure to cooperate with the Holy Spirit's movings by church members thus may delay the coming of the Lord. This is the plain and unequivocal teaching of Ellen White and the Bible.

Let me say, it is my desire to be most humble in this regard. It is not as though I could condemn my brethren, for just as surely as they may be guilty so am I. No doubt I, myself, have played a part in delaying the coming of the Lord. In failing to live up to all of the light that I have had, I believe that I have given Satan reason to triumph. By not taking full of advantage of the opportunities that the Lord has given me to grow in grace, it is my conviction that I have played a part in delaying the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. At times I have lived in insubordination to Jesus' will in my life. Through those times, which I confess are all too frequent, when I have sinned or in some other way misrepresented the character of my beloved Lord, then too, have I failed to cooperate with Jesus' work of giving the gospel to the world. In these cases it is I, that have hindered the coming of the Lord. Whenever I have chosen to disbelieve, for whatever reason, a message of truth which God sent to me, by which He meant to sanctify me, I have delayed the coming of the Lord, Jesus Christ. This is my conviction. I confess that I too have been guilty in my own right, of playing a part in delaying the Lord's return.

Just as surely, however, as the above is true, so it is also true that whenever any of us, or the church general dwells in an atmosphere of unbelief, and fails to appropriate light and truth which God has sent to sanctify His church, then any one of us, and in fact the church corporately may also be guilty of delaying the Lord's coming. I freely confess that it is my settled conviction that God sent just such a message of light and truth to His people through Elder's Waggoner and Jones. Jesus sent these precious treasures of theological truth to His church at that time, for the express purpose of preparing them to meet Him in peace at His

coming. I confess that I have carefully studied the inspired record of that recent history, which God was pleased to give to His remnant church. It is exceptionally clear to me from the testimony of the Spirit of Prophecy, that if the true message of righteousness by faith, which God sent to us in the 1888 era, had been fully and generally accepted by the Seventh-day Adventist church, God would have wrought mightily in His church and the world would have been warned of its danger, the character of Christ would have been fully revealed in His people and Jesus would have come already to receive His people home to glory. The fact that we have had to dwell for many more years on planet earth than God intended is a witness against us. I am not the standard for the truth of 1888. Inspiration has never declared this to be so. However, Inspiration has clearly pointed us to Jones and Waggoner as delegated messengers of "the third angel's message in verity". I confess that I have studied the messages of Jones and Waggoner and that it is my resulting conviction, that the concepts of righteousness by faith, which they presented do not fully agree with the generally accepted ideas of the gospel, which I grew up hearing and continue to hear within the Seventh-day Adventist church. As a result of prayerful study, I humbly submit that it is clear that we, as a church, have failed to appropriate this "most precious message", both as theology and necessarily as a result, experientially, this is one of the most profound ways in which we have sinfully delayed the coming of the Lord.

Is this too much responsibility? Is this an anthropocentric view of things as some individuals seem to suggest? Does such a doctrine give too much importance to man, so that he may be found capable of changing the course of history? Let me remind you that it is Calvinism, not Arminianism, that treats God's will and prophecy as absolute decrees. It is a departure from historic Adventist positions to deny, either the reality of conditional prophecy, or the ability of man to resist the grace of God. Such graces undoubtedly are capable of doing much in man, but it has always been incumbent on Adventists to affirm the ability of the will of man through unbelief and rebellion to hinder the accomplishment in themselves of those changes and works which the Holy Spirit meant to do through the ministry of such grace. This ability of intelligent beings to choose to act in opposition to God, explains the Great Controversy, the fall of Israel, and the possibility of man frustrating "the grace of God". See Gal. 2:23. Although it sounds very pious to reject the teaching of a delay in Christ's coming, based on the idea that it makes man too important, we might also reject the necessity of evangelism on the same unwarranted grounds. Do we really feel that it is so important to preach the gospel to people? How proud of us to think that men may be saved or lost based on whether we faithfully share Jesus with them or not? How egocentric of us to think that our actions might effect someone else's eternal destiny! I speak facetiously. Of course they can and it is a testimony to the wonderful love of God and grace of God, that He not only has called man to such a mission of responsibility, but has made it possible through His power for man to be suitably fitted for such a work. In fact, it is the same work of cooperating in giving the gospel under the special power of the latter rain and loud cry, which is to bring the world to its ultimate decision and facilitate the close of human probation. That we can individually influence the eternal destiny of individual souls is conclusive evidence that a general failure among God's people to corporately appropriate the blessings of the latter rain can and does have bearing on the final decisions of mankind, to be made for or against Christ.

Is it possible that the real reason that this truth is rejected may be found in man's desire to find an excuse for continued insubordination to the Holy Spirit? To deny the consequences of our own course of action, which have hindered the accomplishment of those things which God intended would have occurred in our lives is to deny human responsibility. It is the offense of the cross, to be told that one is responsible for the death of the Son of God, at Calvary. The proclamation of this fact to the Jews and their leaders was what made the disciple's messages after Pentecost so offensive. The offense of the Cross is the same today for Seventh-day Adventists, but the historical event in which we revealed the same spirit as the Jews is different. However, it stands out distinctly in the history of 1888. As a result, I would protest that it is the proclamation of our responsibility for delaying the coming of the Lord through sinful unbelief, that is best calculated to humble us, in view of our great sin, especially as we realize individually those times in which we have imbibed the spirit of resistance to light from our forefathers, stood in disbelief of God's messages of truth and failed to live up to the light by abiding in Christ by faith. We are not predestined to either be saved or lost. The truth of our history affirms that our Arminian soteriology, which ascribes real accountability to man (because he had opportunity, through grace to choose whether to cooperate with God's will or not) is sound. To deny our corporate power of choice to cooperate or rebel against God's plan for us, is to deny the foundations of our Wesleyan heritage. If we should be tempted to pride, because

we have used our liberties so poorly, it must be because we do not understand the magnitude of our sin. It would be ludicrous to be proud of something so shameful.

It is to wander far from the clear, corporate consciousness of our place in prophetic history to deny the delay in Christ's coming. The Laodicean message describes our state, not just as individuals as so many want to emphasize exclusively today, but especially and primarily as a people. It is interesting and alarming to note that within the 33 short years of my lifetime, Seventh-day Adventists have departed so strongly from the convictions they once held. In 1973 and 1974, no doubt under a conscience newly pricked by the emphasis on these points by Elder Robert H. Pierson, General Conference President, the Annual Council voted two powerful appeals for repentance, revival and reformation, within the Seventh-day Adventist church. These two documents voted by the respective Annual Councils of those years plainly acknowledged, no doubt to the chagrin of some who were already departing from the plain counsel of Ellen White, that we, the Seventh-day Adventist church leadership, recognize that the message to the Laodicean church clearly addresses the Seventh-day Adventist church, and especially its leadership. In those appeals, it is also clearly acknowledged that our insubordination has resulted in a delay in the coming of the Lord. Today, however, acknowledgements of these truths come from fewer and fewer sources. Nevertheless, God still has faithful witnesses, who have borne straight testimony on this point of truth. Some that come readily to mind are Elders Kenneth H. Wood, Herbert Douglass, Robert J. Wieland, G. Edward Reid, Lewis Walton and Dennis Priebe.

I am reminded of the billboards once seen in so many locations advertising "Virginia Slims" cigarettes; "You've come a long way baby." I've often thought that women who smoked cigarettes damaged their complexion and health so blatantly that within a few short years of taking up the smoking habit they do indeed look like they have "come a LONG way". Could it be that something similar has happened to our beloved church? Is it really God's will that worldliness should be overwhelming our institutions as it is at the present time? Is it only coincidence that we are losing the majority of our youth and that even most of those that stay in the church bear little or no resemblance to what it once meant to be a Seventh-day Adventist? Our characters, generally have been on the downgrade, as a people; Our piety, weak and dwarfed. Is it not obvious, that our current teachings and experience of righteousness by faith are leaving our people in bondage to sin and rebellion? We think that our de-emphasis on law has given us (much like earlier generations of women smokers) some great freedom from bondage, but in reality we should realize that our failure to believe the balanced message of righteousness by faith has been a source of untold woe and misery, not only to ourselves, but to our children, and to all those whom we could have helped if we had otherwise obeyed the voice of the Lord. Ellen White told the brethren in the 1888 era, that their rejection of the messengers and message would lead to a state of things in the church, which they could not imagine. No doubt this prophecy has been fulfilled to the letter. We have indeed, "come a long way", and as long as we desire to refuse the evidence of our unbelief in the truth, we shall have even more of the fruit of our doings.

"He who covers His sins shall not prosper, but He that confesses and forsakes shall find mercy" Prov. 28:13 As it was preached in Acts, so it must be true of many of us today, we have done this thing in ignorance, not knowing fully what we have been doing, nevertheless "now God is calling all men, everywhere to repent". God may wink at our previous ignorance of our condition and of our further repetition of the sins of our fathers, but God will leave us no excuse for remaining in darkness in this regard. The good news is that if we will acknowledge the convicting work of the Spirit, there is still opportunity to repent. Surely, it is high time that Seventh-day Adventists let our own glory be laid in the dust, accept the truth of our history, and repent of our atrocities against the Lord Jesus Christ.