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Recommended Citation

Ball, B. W. (2015). The second Advent hope in Puritan England. In B. Ball, & R. McIver (Eds.), *Grounds for assurance and hope: Selected biblical and historical writings of Bryan W. Ball* (pp. 232-250). Cooranbong, Australia: Avondale Academic Press.

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Chapter 14: The Second Advent Hope in Puritan England¹

Bryan W. Ball

The passing of the English crown from the Tudors to the Stuarts was to prove a significant milestone in the development of Protestant thought in England. With the accession of James I in 1603, the Puritan² movement, which had taken root in the later years of Elizabeth's reign, came to shape the beliefs of increasing numbers of people, and this notwithstanding the king's early threat to "harry" Puritans out of the land and the later restrictions imposed upon them by the repressive William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury. William Haller remarks that from this time Puritan preachers "increased in number and influence faster than ever before, finding a growing audience ever more willing to listen".³ As time passed and the Bible was more and more expounded by Puritan preachers and writers, clergy and laity alike became increasingly aware of a strong eschatological emphasis in Scripture. The hope of Christ's second coming, together with its associated truths, appears as one of the important outcomes of Puritanism's rediscovery of the total biblical message. Probably at no other time in English history has the doctrine of the second advent been so widely proclaimed or so readily accepted as during the years of Puritanism's ascendancy.

It is the broad sweep of eschatological hope in the seventeenth century that emerges as a major conclusion to the study of Puritan literature. From an ecclesiastical standpoint, the doctrine of Christ's second coming was proclaimed by Anglican and Nonconforming Puritans alike. John Durant, the Independent pastor who preached in Canterbury Cathedral, could say in 1653 that among Protestants of every loyalty "Prelatical or Presbyterian, or Independent or Anabaptist", advocates could be found even of the extremer

1 This chapter, revised and abridged, was first published in V. Norskov Olsen, ed., *The Advent Hope in Scripture and History* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1987).

2 The terms 'Puritan' and 'Puritanism' are used here of English believers in the seventeenth century within and beyond the Anglican Church whose chief concern was for purity of both doctrine and life.

3 London is the place of publication for all 17th century works unless otherwise stated. Publisher's names are not usually given. William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York: Harper, 1957), 50.

millenarian eschatology which by that time had appeared. Certainly in the preceding half century or so many influential clergymen in the British Isles had associated themselves with the more moderate advent hope. To those Anglicans of an earlier generation who had preached the doctrine of Christ's coming – Hugh Latimer, Edwin Sandys, John Bradford and John Rogers, among others – could be added the names of James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh, Patrick Forbes, Bishop of Aberdeen, Joseph Hall, Bishop of Norwich and John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's.

Beyond the ranks of such prominent mainstream Anglicans, the second advent literature was rapidly augmented by works from leading Puritan theologians. The Presbyterians Thomas Brightman, Thomas Hall and James Durham would have differed ecclesiastically from Independents like Thomas Goodwin, Nathaniel Homes, William Strong and John Owen. The hope of Christ's coming, however, became a prominent factor in their theology, each of them contributing significantly to the advent literature which was read and re-read in England during the seventeenth century. Other great Puritan divines would have agreed that the recovery of truth was of far greater consequence than the arid debate over Church government, and names like Thomas Taylor, Richard Sibbes and Richard Baxter cannot be excluded from the list of prominent Puritans who espoused and proclaimed the advent hope.

Socially the doctrine of Christ's coming was evident on an even broader plane. Innumerable commentaries, expositions, pamphlets and sermons from clergy of every rank were complemented by works of various laymen from a wide cross-section of public and private life. From James I to James Ussher, from the mathematician John Napier and the statesman William Alexander, Earl of Stirling to the seventeenth century poets John Donne, George Wither and John Milton, the advent hope found a lucid and compelling expression. Aspects of second advent doctrine investigated by Sir Henry Finch, the lawyer, Samuel Hartlib the economist and schoolmasters Thomas Hayne, William Burton and James Toppe, were re-examined and restated not only by theologians but by other laymen, by Leonard Busher, for example, the early advocate of religious toleration and by Robert Purnell the devout Baptist elder from Bristol. The readiness with which the English Church as a whole took to itself the hope of Christ's coming is one reason for the warmth of spiritual life so characteristic of the Puritan era.

Geographically, the spread of second advent hope was considerable. Certain areas of the country, in view of their association with early Protestantism and the nascent Puritan movement, might be expected to have been more open to a new biblical emphasis. East Anglia and the South East accordingly provided a number of second advent preachers and prophetic expositors.

Joseph Mede studied and lectured at Cambridge; William Bridge had been appointed town preacher at Great Yarmouth and Joseph Hall, nominally at least, was still Bishop of Norwich when he wrote, *The Revelation Unrevealed*. In the West, Richard Bernard, the Anglican rector of Batcombe in Somerset, the Presbyterian John Seagar from Devon and Robert Purnell of Bristol all espoused the advent hope and contributed to its literature. Wales provided the fiery Vavasour Powell and the mystical Morgan Llywd and Ireland the renowned James Ussher. Among the names that could be cited from Midland counties are Thomas Hall from Warwickshire who wrote at least two books concerning the last events, Robert Bolton from Northamptonshire, author of *The Four Last Things* and Richard Baxter from Kidderminster in Worcestershire whose *Saints' Everlasting Rest* is one of the classics of Puritan devotion. Scotland also provided an impressive list of theologians committed to New Testament eschatological hope. James Durham, William Guild and David Dickson were university professors at Glasgow, Aberdeen and Glasgow and Edinburgh respectively. Their writings all convey a deep interest in the events of the last days with a focus on Christ's second coming.

It is clear, then, that many of the most eloquent advocates of the second advent in the British Isles throughout the seventeenth century were prominent theologians loyal to the norms of accepted doctrinal orthodoxy. So Baxter, whose moderation and orthodoxy were widely recognised, is thoroughly representative when he says:

Christ will come again to receive His people to Himself, that where He is, there they may be also. . . . The Bridegroom's departure was not upon divorce. He did not leave us with a purpose to return no more; He hath left pledges enough to assure us. We have His Word, His many promises, His sacraments which show forth His death till He come. . . . He that would come to suffer will surely come to triumph . . . He that would come to purchase will surely come to possess.⁴

Richard Sibbes, another greatly respected Puritan preacher and writer, concurs with similar certainty: "We must take it for granted that there will be a second, glorious coming of Christ . . . God will at length make good what He hath promised".⁵

The Doctrine of the Second Advent

The certainty with which the Church in Puritan England anticipated the *eschaton* is matched only by the clarity with which it understood related aspects of second advent doctrine. Samuel Smith, one of the many Puritan divines ejected at the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 had, in 1618,

⁴ Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* (London, 1650), 45-46.

⁵ Richard Sibbes, *The Brides Longing for her Bridegrooms second coming* (1638), 34.

written *The Great Assize, or, Day of Jubilee*, a popular work which had been through no less than thirty-nine editions by the turn of the century and which was read by many thousands throughout the land. “He shall come as a king”, Smith declared, “full of majesty and glory, guarded and attended upon with many thousands of heavenly soldiers, even all His holy angels”.⁶ There was little deviation in the seventeenth century from the belief that Christ’s coming would be literal, personal and glorious, “in the flesh”, to quote John Seagar, another Puritan preacher. Seagar’s *A Discovery of the World to Come*, an important contribution to the second advent literature at a time when more extreme views were beginning to gather momentum, examined virtually every aspect of the advent hope, emphasising that the bodily and visible return of Christ at the end of the age was to be distinguished from any spiritual “comings” to the individual believer through the presence of the Holy Spirit.⁷

This point was taken up again by Christopher Love, a Presbyterian preacher who also wrote at great length on the advent hope as he found it in Scripture. Love pointed out that the concept of a spiritualised second advent was a third century deviation introduced by Origen and that it should not be regarded as biblical. Love explains:

It was the great mistake of Origen, though he holds for the coming of Christ again, that he pleads for the coming of Christ in spirit. Therefore the text where it is said, ‘You shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven’, Origen understands by the clouds, to be the saints, because it is mentioned in Scripture, that the believers are a cloud of witnesses. Now this is to pervert the whole letter of the Bible, and turn all the Scripture into an allegory and metaphorical sense. . . . I only mention this to confute those that follow the conceit of Origen, merely to make Christ’s coming to be but a spiritual coming, a coming in the hearts of saints.⁸

In harmony with many biblical exegetes of the time, Love recognised that the Bible referred to the coming, or appearing, of Christ in different ways.

In another work, *Heaven’s Glory, Hell’s Terror*, Love drew attention to three apparent comings of Christ mentioned in Scripture, the first in the flesh at the incarnation, another “spiritual” coming through the gospel and the third, a final appearance to judgment at the last day. Love stressed that it was this final coming to judgment which was referred to in both Colossians 3:4 and John 14:3, the texts on which his *Heaven’s Glory* and *The Penitent Pardoned* were respectively based. Hence, “by Christ’s appearing

6 Samuel Smith, *The Great Assize, or, The Day of Jubilee* (1618, 1628 edition cited), 21.

7 John Seagar, *A Discoverie of the World to Come* (1650), 76, 94-95.

8 Christopher Love, *The Penitent Pardoned* (1657), 175.

here, is meant that glorious manifestation of Jesus Christ upon earth at the time when He shall come at the last day”,⁹ and “the same Jesus that you saw ascend, shall descend, so that it cannot be Christ in His spirit, but in His person”¹⁰ who will return at the end of the age.

Apart from the certainty with which Christ’s second coming was anticipated, there is possibly no point of wider agreement among Puritan theologians than on what Love here describes as “a glorious manifestation”. Ussher’s description of Christ’s coming at the end “enviored with a flame of fire, attended with all the host of the elect angels”,¹¹ is matched by Robert Bolton’s “coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory”.¹² John Owen’s exposition of the epistle to the Hebrews, written in 1680, speaks of an “illustrious appearance filling the whole world with the beams of it”,¹³ a late echo of Thomas Taylor’s earlier description of the advent as it appeared in his commentary on Titus, published in Cambridge in 1619, in which he describes the event as occurring “in such glory as neither the tongue can utter, nor the mind of man conceive”.¹⁴ Few exponents of the second advent doctrine in the seventeenth century transmit a note of hope more than does Richard Baxter as he contemplates the glory of the last day:

If there be such cutting down of boughs and spreading of garments, and crying hosanna, to one that comes into Jerusalem riding on an ass; what will there be when He comes with His angels in His gory? If they that heard Him preach the gospel of the kingdom, have their hearts turned within them, that they return and say, ‘Never man spake like this man’ then sure they that behold His majesty and His kingdom, will say “There was never glory like this glory”.¹⁵

In attempting to explain the nature of the second advent, Puritan theologians often compared Christ’s second coming with his first coming at the incarnation. “When our Saviour Jesus Christ lived on earth, He came in misery, very base and lowly”, said Samuel Smith, “but now, He shall come as a king, full of majesty and glory”.¹⁶ Christopher Love, again, is unambiguous in describing the manner of the advent:

When Christ first appeared, He appeared in the form of a servant; at His second coming He shall appear in majesty as a king. In His first appearing He appeared in contempt in a manger, in His second coming He shall shine in glory in the clouds. In His first appearing, He had only

9 Christopher Love, *Heavens Glory, Hells Terror* (1653), 32.

10 Love, *Penitent Pardoned*, 176.

11 James Ussher, *A Body of Divinitie* (1645), 477.

12 Robert Bolton, *The Four Last Things* (1632), 87.

13 John Owen, *Exposition of the Epistle . . . to the Hebrews* (1680), 470.

14 Thomas Taylor, *Commentary on Titus* (Cambridge, 1619), 480.

15 Baxter, *Saints’ Rest*, 776.

16 Smith, *Great Assize*, 21.

beasts to be His companions, in His second appearing He shall have saints and angels to be His attendants.¹⁷

Such precise theological statements concerning the manner in which Christ would come had previously been prefigured in Sir William Alexander's epic poem of some fourteen hundred stanzas *Dooms-day, or, The Great Day of the Lord's Judgment*, (1614):

Who can abide the Glory of that sight,
Which kills the living, and the dead doth raise,
With squadrons compass'd, Angels flaming bright,
Whom thousands serve, Ten thousand thousands praise?
My soul entranced is ravished with that light,
Which in a moment shall the world amaze.¹⁸

If the poetry was not all it might have been, the theology was above reproach, and preachers and people alike widely expected a glorious, visible advent and a personal and literal appearance of Christ at the end of the age.

But when would Christ's second coming occur? In attempting to answer this tantalising question, Puritan theologians and preachers were aware that they were wrestling with a problem that went back to the earliest days of the Christian Church. Thomas Hall is representative of his own age in echoing the New Testament note of imminence when he says "The days we live in are the last days. Our times are the last times . . . this is the last hour . . . and upon us the ends of the world are come".¹⁹ The Puritans of the seventeenth century were essentially children of the Reformation and within the context of Reformation theology, itself contained within the framework of the New Testament, there was but one answer that could be given. Christ would come soon. The end of the present order was imminent. As Hall again points out, "If the apostle thought the day of the Lord was at hand sixteen hundred years ago, we may well conclude that it is near now".²⁰ The Puritan preachers readily identified with the New Testament emphasis on the imminence of the second advent and Henry Symons speaks for many when he says:

It will not be long before this Judge comes . . . yea, I may say of some here as was said of Simeon, they shall not depart this life before they shall see the Lord's Christ. . . . He is on the wing, he will be here before most are aware.²¹

This conviction that Christ's coming was at hand became widespread in

17 Love, *Heavens Glory*, 38.

18 William Alexander, 'Dooms-day, or The Great Day of the Lord's Judgement' (1614), in *Recreations with the Muses* (1637), 48.

19 Thomas Hall, *Commentary . . . upon . . . the Latter Epistle to Timothy* (1658), 7.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Henry Symons, *The Lord Jesus His Commission* (1657), 35-36.

England in the seventeenth century, but as Henry Symons and many others plainly demonstrate, it was a conviction which could be held without becoming involved in capricious date-setting or the subjective interpretation of prophecy. When these men and their contemporaries studied the Bible they discovered a recurring eschatological emphasis. They saw that Christ himself had spoken at length of the last days and the consummation of world history and that the early Church had gone forth on its world mission seemingly sustained in the hope of an early fulfilment of Christ's promises. As the Puritan apologist strove to recapture the spirit as well as the letter of the New Testament eschatology, he inevitably identified with the hopes of the early Church. Thus to Richard Baxter, the eventful day is "approaching", "not far off" and "comes apace". Thomas Adams, whose prodigious exposition of 2 Peter went to more than sixteen hundred folio pages, explained:

The time from Christ's ascension to the world's end, is called *dies extrema*, the last day, because it immediately (without any general alteration) goes before it. The end in the apostles' time was not far off, now it must be very near: if that were *ultima dies*, this is *ultima hora*: or if that were *ultima hora*, the last hour, this is *ultimum horae*, the last minute.²²

Hall is one of many in the seventeenth century who see the entire post-New Testament age in an eschatological sense. The last days began with the apostolic age, and it behoves good Christians to live always in the expectation of a final fulfilment. In professing the hope of an imminent advent, Puritan preachers clearly felt an affinity with the first disciples of Christ, and Baxter speaks again for many when he exclaims, "How near is that most blessed joyful day? It comes apace, even He that comes will come, and will not tarry".²³

The Basis of Eschatological Hope

The foundation of eschatological hope in seventeenth-century England was the unqualified acceptance of Scripture as the sole source of faith and doctrine. The Puritan apologist wishing to substantiate a point of doctrine turned instinctively to the Bible. James Ussher argues, "The books of holy scripture are so sufficient for the knowledge of Christian religion, that they do most plentifully contain all doctrine necessary to salvation".²⁴ Richard Baxter's *Saints' Everlasting Rest* similarly stated, "The Scripture promising that rest to us is the perfect infallible word and law of God".²⁵ Christopher Love exhorts his readers to "Be sure you make the word of God to be the standard by which you try and prove all doctrines that you hear, and if there

22 Thomas Adams, *A Commentary . . . upon . . . Second Peter* (1633), 1130.

23 Baxter, *Saints' Rest*, 254.

24 Ussher, *Body of Divinitie*, 18.

25 Baxter, *Saints' Rest*, title page.

be anything preached . . . that is not according to the word of God, believe it not".²⁶ To the true Puritan the Bible was authoritative, not only in its record of the past and in its guidance for the present life and doctrine of the believer, but equally so in its delineation of future events.

In his *Penitent Pardoned* Christopher Love sets out the doctrine of Christ's second advent as an integral element in the historic Christian faith. On John 14:3 Love comments, "This text contains in it the most material and fundamental points of all the doctrine of Christianity", notably "the great doctrine of Christ's second coming".²⁷ John Owen, the eminent Puritan theologian, similarly argues, "Christ's appearance the second time, his return from heaven to complete the salvation of the church, is the great fundamental principle of our faith and hope".²⁸ Richard Sibbes, an earlier exponent of the second advent whose works were published posthumously between 1635 and 1650, had suggested that since the coming of Christ was fundamental to Christian doctrine, it should be desired by the Church:

Such is the disposition of the church, that before Christ was come, good people were known by the desire of his coming. And therefore it was the description of holy men that they waited for the consolation of Israel. O Lord come quickly, come in the flesh. But now the first coming is past they desire as much his second coming, and therefore they are described in the epistle of St Paul, to be such as love and long for the appearing of Christ.²⁹

Such expectancy was an essential characteristic of the true Church, the espoused bride of the heavenly bridegroom, and Sibbes adds, "As in civil marriage there is a contract, so here in the spiritual; and seeing there is a contract, there is also an assent to the second coming of Christ; the contracted spouse must needs say 'Amen' to the marriage day".³⁰

Since the second advent hope was related to the revealed purpose of God for his people William Jenkyn logically enquired, "If the other predictions in Scripture, particularly those concerning the first coming of Christ, have truly come to pass, why should we doubt of the truth of Christ's second appearance?"³¹ Jenkyn's question, rhetorical though it was, had already been answered by Richard Baxter: "As Christ failed not to come in the fullness of time, even when Daniel and others had foretold his coming, so in the fullness and fitness of time will his second coming be".³²

The foregoing statements suggest that a relationship was recognised in

26 Christopher Love, *A Christians Duty and Safety in Evil Times* (1653), 82.

27 Love, *Penitent Pardoned*, 115.

28 Owen, *Hebrews*, 471.

29 Sibbes, *The Brides Longing*, 55-56.

30 *Ibid.*, 15.

31 William Jenkyn, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Jude* (1652), pt. I, 537.

32 Baxter, *Saints' Rest*, 92.

Puritan eschatology between the incarnation and Christ's coming at the end. This relationship, in fact, saw the second advent as a necessary and inevitable theological sequel to the first advent. "The first and second coming of Christ are of so near connection", Richard Sibbes argued, "that oftentimes they are comprised together, as the regeneration of our souls and the regeneration of our bodies, the adoption of our souls and the adoption of our bodies, the redemption of our souls and the redemption of our bodies".³³ Christ must come again to complete the work of salvation which he had begun at his first coming. Indeed, many would argue strenuously that the work of redemption could not be complete or efficacious until Christ returned.

The concept that a theological link existed between Christ's two advents and that it related ultimately to the redemptive purposes of God in Christ, was nowhere put more forcibly than by John Durant in his introduction to *The Salvation of the Saints by the Appearance of Christ* (1653). Durant explained that many Christians were content to go no further in appreciating the redemptive work of Christ than in understanding what had been accomplished at the cross. In Durant's view this was unfortunate, since the final and total salvation of humanity depended also on the work which Christ accomplished after his death and resurrection. While it was not to be disputed that the atoning sacrifice of Christ lay at the heart of God's redemptive plan, yet it did not constitute the whole of Christ's work. Although it was the "*medium impetrationis*", it was not the "*medium applicationis*". Salvation had been "purchased" but not "completed". Beyond the cross "there remained a great deal more to be done . . . to apply it unto us".³⁴ Thus the divine redemptive purpose had been furthered through Christ's priestly ministry in heaven, and would culminate at his second coming.

To Durant, as to many other theologians in the seventeenth century, a believer's salvation was now in hope, at a distance, as the rightful, though suspended, inheritance of an heir under age. While accomplished and assured it was not yet a tangible reality, although Durant was careful to point out that it was "as safe as if you had it".³⁵ The robe had been provided, as had the crown, and at his coming the Lord would deliver both. "Christ keeps the crown till the day of His appearance and kingdom, and in that day He will give it to you".³⁶ Sibbes said that at his second coming Christ "shall perfect our salvation". Love stated, "You shall then be saved to the uttermost" and John Owen, with a little more finesse, added "the end of His appearance is

33 Sibbes, *The Brides Longing*, 72.

34 John Durant, *The Salvation of the Saints* (1653), Epistle to the Reader, sig. A7r.

35 *Ibid.*, 221.

36 *Ibid.*

eis soteriav, the salvation of them that look for Him”.³⁷

Whether it was to effect or complete an individual’s salvation, or to make it a reality, or to receive the redeemed to himself, it was clear to believers in Puritan England that the final chapter in the saga of human redemption could not be written until Christ had returned at the end of days as he himself and other biblical writers had promised.

The Soteriological Significance of the Second Advent

William Haller has drawn attention to the theological and experiential sequence by which a believer in the seventeenth century eventually attained to salvation. “Election – vocation – justification – sanctification – glorification was more than an abstract formula”, he says. “It became the pattern of the most profound experience of men through many generations”.³⁸ In the understanding of most Puritans, glorification at Christ’s coming would set the seal upon his experience in this present life and effectively prepare him for the life to come. John Milton drew an argument for the necessity of the second advent from his understanding of glorification. In his *Treatise on Christian Doctrine* Milton contrasts the “imperfect glorification to which believers attain in this life” with the “perfect glorification which is effected in eternity”. Of the latter he states, “Its fulfilment and consummation will commence from the period of Christ’s second coming to judgment, and the resurrection of the dead”.³⁹ To Milton a believer’s glorification is an essential factor in the redemptive purpose of the gospel. It is a process which begins in this life but which is not fully realised until the second advent.

Other Puritan theologians shared similar views about glorification. To Christopher Love, glorification was essentially the future, eternal state of the believer, “that we shall enjoy with Christ, when the world is ended” and which would become a reality when Christ “shall appear to judge the world”.⁴⁰ Thomas Brooks, writing in *The Glorious Day of the Saints Appearance*, states succinctly “when He shall appear the second time . . . He shall appear glorious, and so shall all His saints”.⁴¹ To Milton, Love and Brooks alike, the believer’s glorification is bound up with the ultimate purpose of the gospel and is contingent upon the second advent.

Those who lived in the seventeenth century saw another aspect to the completion of Christ’s redemptive work. Not only was it essential that Christ

37 Richard Sibbes, *An Exposition of the Third Chapter of the Epistle . . . to the Philippians* (1639), 225; Love, *Heavens Glory*, 51; Owen, *Hebrews*, 470.

38 Haller, *Rise of Puritanism*, 93.

39 John Milton, ‘A Treatise on Christian Doctrine’, in *The Works of John Milton* (New York: Columbia University, 1931), vol. XVI, 337.

40 Love, *Heavens Glory*, 4,6.

41 Thomas Brooks, *The Glorious Day of the Saints Appearance* (1648), 6.

should finish that work for the sake of believers, it was equally essential as far as he was concerned himself. He had begun a work and it was unthinkable that he should leave it unfinished. Having undertaken the restoration of man to the fullness of fellowship with God and having at his first coming through the atoning act on the cross, achieved reconciliation between God and mankind, it was incumbent on him now to bring everything to a just and satisfactory conclusion. This he would do, and could only do, at his second coming. Richard Sibbes had been persuaded by this argument, suggesting that the second advent would bring to perfection not only the Church and the individual believer, but even Christ himself. "Christ is in some sort [way] imperfect till the latter day, till his second coming", Sibbes stated, explaining:

The mystical body of Christ is His fullness. Christ is our fullness, and we are His fullness; now Christ's fullness is made up, when all the members of His mystical body are gathered and united together; the head and the members make but one natural body . . . Christ in this sense is not fully glorious therefore till that time.⁴²

The emphasis is almost that of a divine obligation, self-imposed by the very nature of deity, to bring all to a glorious completion, so Sibbes commented again that Christ must come the second time "to make an end of what he hath begun".⁴³

A further turn to this argument came from the logic of what may be described as the continuity of Christ's work for mankind. As Haller's soteriological formula suggests, believers in the seventeenth century came to realise that Christ's identification with humanity was not be seen merely as one act at a given time in history, but rather as a continuing involvement. Christopher Love thus saw the second advent, not as an isolated event at the end of time, but as part of an unceasing process which moved towards the ultimate complete and harmonious restoration of fellowship between man and God. This process, having begun at the incarnation, had continued ever since and included, in succession, Christ's death on the cross, his ascension to heaven, his priestly ministry in heaven, his second advent, the resurrection of the dead and "the great doctrine of that everlasting communion that the saints shall have with Christ in heaven".⁴⁴ More recently theologians have again recognised the essential truth in this assertion, describing the various aspects of Christ's work as 'the Christ event'.

The writings of both Christopher Love and John Durant suggest that if Christ's ascension and priestly ministry could be shown as necessary parts of this continuous work, then it would naturally follow that the second ad-

42 Sibbes, *The Brides Longing*, 50-51.

43 Richard Sibbes, 'The Churches Echo', 107 in *Beams of Divine Light* (1639).

44 Love, *Penitent Pardoned*, 115.

vent, with its outcomes of restoration and restored fellowship, would be seen in a similar light. Therefore Love, before he discusses the second advent, emphasises the importance in the total work of Christ of his mediatorial ministry in heaven. He “is entered into the very heavens that He might appear before God for us”.⁴⁵ Love goes on to argue that the intercessory ministry of Christ in heaven is to be regarded as even more essential than his personal presence on earth. Only as Christ fulfils the office of high priest in heaven can he adequately make intercession for all men. This he could not do by being bodily present on earth, “therefore we have great advantage by Christ’s going into heaven”.⁴⁶

John Durant drew an analogy from the sanctuary services of Old Testament Israel. In the sanctuary ritual it was not sufficient, Durant argued, for the sacrifice merely to be offered. It was also necessary for the blood of the sacrifice to be taken into the tabernacle itself. The significance of the sacrificial system was incomplete until the shed blood had been administered in that way. Durant then continues:

When Christ died, the sacrifice was slain, the blood was shed, there was no more sacrifice to succeed, all was finished in that respect; but yet all was not done till the blood of Christ was carried into the holy places, which was not until Christ went to heaven, to appear as our high priest.⁴⁷

Having thus established the necessity of Christ’s high priestly ministry, both Love and Durant then proceed to discuss the doctrine of the second advent in its logical sequence as the consummation of Christ’s work for humanity. He had voluntarily undertaken the salvation of mankind in response to the universal problem of sin, and the moral constraint to complete that work was indisputable.

Another dimension was given to the doctrine of Christ’s second coming by Richard Baxter: “Fellow Christians, what a day will that be, when we who have been kept prisoners by sin, by sinners, by the grave, shall be fetched out by the Lord Himself”⁴⁸ Baxter suggests here a hope which is related to a definitive event in time. It is “by the grave” as well as by sin, that men have been bound and prevented from enjoying the fullness of fellowship with God for which they were created. Thus only as the grave is conquered and its captive released can the believer enter into eternal life in the widest sense. The limitations of mortality must be overcome and when Baxter speaks of an everlasting rest for the saints he speaks of more than the liberation of the soul from the body at death. To be sure, in Baxter’s view

45 *Ibid.*, 122.

46 *Ibid.*

47 Durant, *Salvation of the Saints*, 48-49.

48 Baxter, *Saints’ Rest*, 47.

the saint's rest begins at death when the soul is liberated from the body, but this is only a partial rest. The fullness of the saint's rest is not achieved until after the resurrection when soul and body are united again, and Baxter looks forward confidently to the day when "perfect soul and body together" come into the presence of God.⁴⁹ This essential reunification of body and soul will take place at "that most blessed joyful day", that is at the second coming of Christ. In this assurance Baxter can trustingly commit his whole being to the grave:

O hasten that great resurrection day! When thy command shall go forth, and none shall disobey; when the sea and earth shall yield up their hostages, and all that slept in the graves shall awake, and the dead in Christ shall first arise . . . therefore dare I lay down my carcass in the dust, entrusting it, not to a grave, but to thee: and therefore my flesh shall rest in hope, till thou raise it to the possession of everlasting rest.⁵⁰

Through his redemptive act on the cross "Christ bought the whole man, so shall the whole partake of the everlasting benefits of the purchase".⁵¹ In short, the fullness and blessedness of eternal life can only be realised through the resurrection of the body.

This again is Christopher Love's message when he argues that the "main end of Christ's coming again" is the resurrection of the body.⁵² It is what John Durant means when he declares "salvation is only yours at the last day".⁵³ The doctrine of the resurrection of the body is thus very much a question of a believer's personal salvation. "You are already redeemed in your souls", says Durant, "but your bodies are not yet redeemed . . . in that day you shall have not only soul-salvation, but body-salvation".⁵⁴ The consensus of opinion in Puritan England was that Christian hope lay less in the survival of the soul after death, as widespread as that doctrine undoubtedly was, than in the new creation of the whole being.⁵⁵ When David Dickson spoke of "the full accomplishment of the salvation of the believers" he spoke in terms of Christ's coming and the resurrection of the body.⁵⁶ He who had in the first place fashioned man from the dust of the ground and pronounced him perfect, would yet bring forth from the grave a multitude of men and women with bodies not subject to "diseases and distempers, infirmities and

49 *Ibid.*, 836.

50 *Ibid.*, 837-38.

51 *Ibid.*, 29.

52 Love, *Penitent Pardoned*, 197.

53 Durant, *Salvation of the Saints*, Ep. Ded., sig. A4v.

54 *Ibid.*, 224-25.

55 On the doctrine of conditional immortality in seventeenth-century England, see Bryan W. Ball, *The Soul Sleepers: Christian Mortalism from Wycliffe to Priestley* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2008) and chapter 15 of this volume.

56 David Dickson, *A Short Explanation of Hebrews* (Aberdeen, 1635), 193.

deformities, maimedness and monstrous shapes”.⁵⁷ Here again is glorification, the hope of personal and perfect salvation, and in professing that hope the saints in seventeenth century England were not ashamed.

Consequences of the Advent Hope

The Puritan emphasis on eschatology and the coming of Christ in glory reminded believers that hope was an essential element of Christian faith. As devout and erudite scholars diligently studied Scripture they learned of a hope set before them, of a hope laid up in heaven, of a hope that the body would be resurrected at the last day. They read that Christian believers were begotten unto a lively hope, that they were heirs of the hope of eternal life and that they were to look for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of Christ. It all spoke of a future consummation in time, and in professing such hope the saints in seventeenth-century England felt one with those of New Testament times.

It was precisely this hope that encouraged believers along the path to sanctification and ultimate glorification. The goal to be reached by travelling this path was godliness, the evidence of fitness for eternity to be spent in the presence of a holy God and holy angels. “If a man hope for this coming of Christ, he will purify himself for it, even as He is pure. He will not appear in his foul clothes, but . . . will fit himself as the bride for the coming of the bridegroom”, Sibbes declared.⁵⁸ Even as the earthly bride did not spend the time of her betrothal dreaming of bliss to come, but in acquiring apparel suitable for the wedding and in the exacting task of preparation for a new life, both so the Church and the individual believer were to spend the remaining time in preparation for Christ’s coming and eternity to follow. As Alexander Nisbet pointed out, belief in Christ’s second coming “is a special means to make Christians thrive in grace and holiness”.⁵⁹ Richard Sibbes emphasised that the converse was also true. If the hope of Christ’s coming is not seen to work efficaciously in the present life of the believer, “it is but a false conceit and lying fancy”.⁶⁰ Sibbes also notes the positive effect of Christian hope:

If we say this truly, come Lord Jesus, undoubtedly it will have an influence into our lives. It will stir up all graces in the soul; as faith, to lay hold upon it; hope, to expect it; love, to embrace it; patience, to endure anything for it; heavenly mindedness, to fit and prepare us for it.⁶¹

True Christians, in Ussher’s words, “always live in expectation of the Lord Jesus in the clouds”, with oil in their lamps and “prepared for His

57 Bolton, *Four Last Things*, 129.

58 Sibbes, *The Brides Longing*, 73-74.

59 Alexander Nisbet, *A Brief Exposition of . . . St Peter* (1658), 330.

60 Sibbes, *Brides Longing*, 73-74.

61 *Ibid.*, 79.

coming".⁶²

All this recaptures both the letter and the spirit of New Testament eschatological hope. Thomas Goodwin is one of many seventeenth century writers who recognised that the Church in the New Testament lived constantly in the expectation of an early fulfilment of Christ's promise to return. The early Church "had that day in their eye", they "walked in view of it", consequently they were "set forth as a pattern" to succeeding generations.⁶³ Thus, in Goodwin's view, the whole gamut of eschatological doctrine - belief in Christ's coming, the interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy, the computation of biblical chronology, an understanding of the age, the future of the papacy, the millennium and the kingdom, all, in the last analysis, were to be measured by one criterion. "The only use of knowing them", declared Goodwin, is "to prepare for them".⁶⁴ John Durant likewise exhorted "it is your work and wisdom, to cleanse yourselves from all filth, and to perfect holiness in a filial fear of God".⁶⁵

While Puritan believers looked forward to a definitive point in time for the ultimate realisation of their hopes, they also understood that the future emerged from the present. Eschatological hope was not posited solely on an isolated even at the end of time, but rather in the culmination of a divine, age-long process. For the world, this process had been in operation from the beginning of history; for the individual it had begun with the inward working of divine grace at conversion. There was no future, no hope, for those who in the present lived only for the present. The hope associated with the last events led both Church and individual saint towards a future final event only along the path of present and total commitment.

Christopher Love preached ten sermons on the coming of Christ and the glory of the future life from Colossians 3:4, all of them based on the three propositions: that Christ is the life of the believer now, that Christ will appear in glory at the end of time, and that when he does appear the saints will appear in glory with him. Love's argument is that the saints will appear with Christ in glory at the end only as his holy life is manifest in them now.⁶⁶ Richard Sibbes also emphasised the relationship between the believer's present life and the future, using the analogy of the marriage of the bride with the heavenly bridegroom at the end of time. Before this marriage can be finally ratified there is to be a threefold union of Christ with his Church, a union of nature, a union of grace and a union of glory. To Sibbes, the union

62 Ussher, *Body of Divinitie*, 451.

63 Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin, D.D.*, 5 Vols. 1681-1704, vol. V, pt. II, 25.

64 *Ibid.*, vol. II, pt. I, 190.

65 Durant, *Salvation of the Saints*, Ep. Ded., sig. A5r.

66 Love, *Heavens Glory*, 4-5.

of nature came through the incarnation when Christ took upon himself human nature. The union of grace comes through the effective outworking of the gospel in human experience, when believers partake of the divine nature. The union of glory will be at the end when the Church, duly prepared and perfected, will be in heaven, in the presence of Christ.⁶⁷ The marriage cannot be consummated until this union of glory occurs, but this union itself is not possible without either those of nature or grace. The future, either of church or of individual believer, cannot be isolated from the present. It is part of it, the culmination in time of a process in history and in life.

The reality of this hope in the personal experience of the individual believer finds expression in many ways in the writings of the Puritan Adventists. Richard Sibbes, for instance, sees it as an effective antidote to sin:

The soul is never in such a tune, as when the thoughts of those glorious times have raised the affections to the highest pitch . . . so long as it is so affected, it cannot sin . . . so long then, as we keep our hearts in a blessed frame of faith, and in a love of the appearing of Christ, they are impregnable.⁶⁸

To Thomas Goodwin, hope is a barrier against the machinations of Satan. "The devil, the shorter his time is, the more he rages and . . . seeing these are the last days . . . the more should we endeavour to do God service".⁶⁹ To Thomas Brooks, it is a challenge to prepare the whole man for eternity. "Those that have hopes to reign with Christ in glory, that have set their hearts on that pure and blissful state . . . they will purify both their insides, and their outsides, both body and soul".⁷⁰ It is an incentive to duty and obedience.⁷¹ It is the spring of brotherly love.⁷² It is a stimulus to work and to pray for others.⁷³ It is the root of happiness and contentment in the present life.⁷⁴ There is, in short, no aspect of Christian life and doctrine that is not quickened and ennobled by the influence of a positive eschatological hope.

This theology of hope is an effective agent which breaks down the barrier between present and future by bringing the future into the present in a form which is accessible to every aspiring believer. In the language of the time, it is eloquently summarised by Thomas Brooks in the introduction to his *Heaven on Earth*, when he says "Holiness is the very marrow of religion",

Holiness is God stamped upon the soul; it is Christ formed in the heart; it is our light, our life, our beauty, our glory, our joy, our crown, our

67 Sibbes, *Beams of Divine Light*, 102.

68 Sibbes, *Brides Longing*, 105-106.

69 Goodwin, *Works*, vol. I, pt. III, 133.

70 Thomas Brooks, *Heaven on Earth* (1654), 540.

71 Love, *Heavens Glory*, 47.

72 Nathaniel Holmes, *The Resurrection Revealed* (1653), 542.

73 Sibbes, *Philippians*, 230.

74 Taylor, *Titus*, 492.

heaven, our all. The holy soul is happy in life, and blessed in death, and shall be transcendently glorious in the morning of the resurrection, when Christ shall say, 'Lo, here am I, and my holy ones, who are my joy; lo, here am I, and my holy ones, who are my crown; and therefore, upon the heads of these holy ones will I set an immortal crown'. Even so, Amen, Lord Jesus.⁷⁵

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the advent hope was an indispensable factor, perhaps even the chief factor, in the vitality and spirituality which characterised both the Church and the individual believer in the seventeenth century.

We return again to Richard Sibbes to note the immediate significance of eschatological hope in the life of the believer and in the life of the Church. The fundamental unity of the believer with Christ and the consequential unity of believer with believer within the Church were both seen in direct relationship to a positive belief in the coming of Christ. Sibbes had repeatedly stressed the point: "the contracted spouse must needs say 'Amen' to the marriage day", "it is the disposition of a gracious heart, to desire the glorious coming of Christ Jesus", and "the more we have of Christ in us, the more shall we desire His coming to us".⁷⁶ The implications of all this must be understood, Sibbes argues:

Let us labour to have all the corners of the heart filled up with the spirit of Christ: our understandings with knowledge; our affections with love and delight; and our wills with obedience. The Scripture calls it, being filled with all the fullness of God . . . the more we enter into the kingdom of heaven by growth in grace here, the fitter shall we be for it and the more shall we desire it.⁷⁷

To Sibbes, as to a multitude of others, fellowship with Christ in glory was measurably dependent on fellowship with Christ in grace. The relationship was unalterable but not unattainable, and belief in the second advent effectually contributed to the believer's present spiritual condition.

Yet the goal of Christian unity was more than a personal relationship between Christ and the individual believer which would culminate at Christ's coming. The entire Church was to draw a blessing from the second advent hope, a blessing related to the unity of believer with believer, and it was at this very point that Sibbes found cause for concern. In the preface to his *Glorious Feast of the Gospel* he regrets that many have apparently lost this necessary relationship: "Alas, Christians have lost much of their communion with Christ and his saints".⁷⁸ The very experience upon which the future glory of both Church and believer rested was being eroded and the reason

⁷⁵ Brooks, *Heaven on Earth*, 606-07.

⁷⁶ Sibbes, *Brides Longing*, 15,48, 84.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

⁷⁸ Richard Sibbes, *The Glorious Feast of the Gospel* (1650), Preface.

was clear: "They have woefully disputed away, and dispirited the life of religion and the power of godliness into dry and sapless controversies about government of Church and State".⁷⁹ Matters of a secondary consequence have come to claim the attention of many, and Sibbes' point of concern is apparent. Let the message of the Church take precedence over its machinery. Let believers recapture a unity with Christ and with each other through a rediscovery of essentials.

From this premise, Sibbes went on to set forth the doctrine of the second advent as an integral part of the total New Testament message. Other influential preachers in the seventeenth century voiced similar sentiments. Edmund Calamy and Stephen Marshall, both moderate and esteemed, deplored the divisions which had appeared in church and kingdom and Marshall described the multiplicity of sects into which the church had been divided as an "epidemical disease . . . pleasing to Satan".⁸⁰ The divisions within the Church were clearly an obstacle to the realisation of the divine purpose and while some undoubtedly expected the desired unity to be realised through acts of parliament and the establishment of a state Church, there were many whose discernment was more far-reaching. William Strong's eschatological hope of "perfect and sweet communion with one another" is contingent upon the communion of each individual believer with God, in Christ.⁸¹ The cure for division, according to the moderator of the Westminster Assembly, lay in a universal acceptance and an individual application of the essentials of the Christian faith and the last word thus belongs to Jeremiah Whittaker:

The way to cure the bleeding distempers of Christendom is for all men to endeavour to get inward persuasions answerable to their outward professions, for as these main principles are more or less believed, so is the heart and life of men better or worse ordered. When the soul is once fully persuaded that Christ is God, that He is the true Messiah, that there is another life besides this, that the Lord Christ is ready to come to judgement and His reward is with Him, then the soul begins to seek and beg an interest in Christ, to flee from wrath to come, to assure the hopes of heaven, whilst we are on earth. And this hope, when once truly attained, carries the soul far above the comforts of life, and beyond the fears of death.⁸²

There is more here than mere concern with ecclesiastical politics or Church structure, more than the unrealistic ambitions of a radical millenar-

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Stephen Marshall, *A Sermon . . . The Unity of the Saints with Christ* (1653), 21, 37.

⁸¹ William Strong, *The Trust and Account of a Steward* (1647), 29.

⁸² Jeremiah Whitaker, *The Christian's Hope Triumphant* (1645), Ep. Ded.

ian minority. Hope, the future, Christ's coming, eternal life – these, in the context of a complete Christocentric gospel and in the experience of each believer, are the basis of a valid ecumenism, the assurance of an ultimate triumph. Many in the seventeenth century died in that hope and counted it a privilege to do so. They had not received the promises, but with the eye of faith had seen them afar off, and the Church in Puritan England was stronger for the advent hope it cherished and for its effect on the lives of those who embraced it.

