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THE VISIBLE, GLORIOUS RETURN OF CHRIST: A LATE GEORGIAN NOVELTY?

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I. A CONFESSION WITH WHICH TO BEGIN

Raised in a premillennial evangelical setting in which the visible and imminent return of Christ was a constant theme, I easily supposed that this conviction was a distinguishing mark of earnest Christianity everywhere and in all ages. In my adult life I have reassessed this approach to last things; yet, even so, I have not abandoned the opinion that premillennialist Christianity excelled at keeping the return of the Lord before the attention of the church to a degree that other approaches did not. Yet this observation leaves to one side the question of the methods premillennialists have relied on to foster this attentiveness.

II. A REPEATED CHARGE OF DOCTRINAL NOVELTY

With this in my background, you will understand why I took note of repeated modern claims (I will mention four) that this emphasis upon the visible, personal return of Christ represents a *novel* development introduced since 1820. In a 1988 essay, evangelical historian David W. Bebbington asserted, ‘previously (to the 1820s), belief in a visible return by Christ in the flesh had been no part of accepted doctrine.’¹ This 1988 article was a warm-up for a treatment of the same issue in the same author’s magisterial 1989 book, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. In it, Bebbington returned to this subject and argued in identical terms, adding, ‘most respected Evangelicals did not believe it’.² This claim was further reiterated (though in a somewhat more muted manner) in the same author’s 2005 *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody*. There, Bebbington maintained, ‘The novel teaching [...] had the great attraction that, unlike much previous belief,

¹ David W. Bebbington, ‘The Advent Hope in British Evangelicalism Since 1800’, *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, 9.2 (1988), 103. In drawing attention to this published opinion of Bebbington, the author stresses that this historian’s grasp of the sweep of evangelical history is unrivalled and worthy of the highest esteem. He has been kind enough to comment on this paper.

² David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: The Story from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 83.

it held that the return of Christ would be in person'.³ More recently, and with still more gusto, the Canadian historian, Donald Akenson, has reiterated this claim:

this idea that the return of Jesus Christ as mentioned in the scriptures was to be taken as a literal prophecy of his actual physical return to earth in his original bodily form was so fresh, so minority-minted, that it was revolutionary. The idea simply was not part of Christian doctrine, generally conceived.⁴

The implication of this kind of historical argument was two-fold: first, Christianity (and evangelical Protestantism) had managed very adequately prior to 1820 without an emphasis on the visible return of Christ and second, that the introduction of this emphasis represented a narrowing and hardening of something which had earlier been more elastic.

III. WHAT KIND OF PROOF WAS BROUGHT FORWARD FOR THIS CHARGE OF 'NOVELTY'?

Less than you would have expected. Akenson, the last-named, cited no proof whatsoever in support of his contention.⁵ Bebbington had focused upon the radical (and quite self-serving) complaints of the advocates of the new premillennialism emerging in the 1820s. The advocates were such figures as Henry Drummond (1786-1860), Edward Irving (1792-1834), and Lewis Way (1772-1840).⁶ These rather angular characters were hardly dispassionate observers of the contemporary evangelical scene.⁷ Bebbington buttressed their allegations with some instances suggesting ambivalent attitudes towards any physical second advent by evangelical luminar-

³ David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody, History of Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 2005), p. 91.

⁴ Donald Harman Akenson, *Exporting the Rapture: John Nelson Darby and the Victorian Conquest of North American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 35.

⁵ As the resemblance between Akenson's claim and the earlier claim of Bebbington is striking, it would be fair to assume that the more recent writer was at least familiar with the claim of the earlier.

⁶ See the entries for each in the Donald M. Lewis, *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996): Drummond, I, 326-7; Irving, I, 595-6; Way, II, 1164.

⁷ The disruptive influence of this trio has been described by the current author in 'A Millennial Maelstrom in Late Georgian London: The Tumultuous Course of the Continental Society 1818-1832', in *Prisoners of Hope: Evangelical Millennialism in the 19th Century*, ed. by Timothy Stunt and Crawford Gribben (Carlisle, Paternoster Publishers, 2004), chap. 6.

ies such as Thomas Scott (1747-1821), known as a Bible commentator and author and Charles Simeon (1759-1836), the notable Cambridge preacher.⁸ Yet it is the argument of this paper that both Drummond, Irving and Way who originally made this charge, and Bebbington and Akenson who have relayed it, have misjudged matters. The first-named were mistaken in calling into question the belief of their evangelical contemporaries in a physical second advent. The second-named have not adequately supported their claim that these targeted attitudes were in fact held. Three strands of material accessible both to them (and to us) point in a different direction than the one they have argued for. We will address these three methodically in turn.

IV. CONSIDERING CREEDS, HYMNS, AND THE INTERPRETATION OF NEW TESTAMENT 'PILLAR' PASSAGES

A. Clues from Earlier Christianity: Creeds

The three premillennial critics, Irving, Drummond, and Way — whatever were their ideas on the last things — were not members of some obscure sect. Irving, a transplanted Scot, was serving a Church of Scotland congregation at London's Regent Square. Lewis Way was a Church of England minister, trained first in law, was labouring as the agent of a society aimed at the evangelization of Jews. Henry Drummond, a banker and a Member of Parliament, was active in the Church of England; he exercised the right to appoint the Church of England minister serving the parish church on his estates at Albury, Surrey. All three will have been familiar with the phraseology of the two ancient creeds (the Apostles and the Nicene), each of which incorporate language regarding Christ's second advent. The first speaks of Christ, seated at the right hand of God, 'from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead'; the second, more fulsomely states: 'He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, of whose kingdom there will be no end.'⁹ If the three critics knew the cadences of

⁸ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, p. 81 note 56 cites J.H. Pratt, *The Thought of the Evangelical Leaders: Notes of Discussions of the Ecclectic Society, London during the Years 1798-1814* (1856; reprinted Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978), p. 256 in support of the claim regarding Scott; he cites William Carus, *Memoirs of the Life of Charles Simeon* (London: Hatchard & Sons, 1856), p. 658 in support of the claim regarding Simeon.

⁹ The wording of each is quoted as printed in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. by Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 25, 28.

these creeds, so — equally — did the contemporary evangelical Protestants who, they alleged, denied the physical return.¹⁰

B. Hymnody in the Eighteenth Century

It would be hard to make out a case for pervasive forgetfulness of Christ's return as well because Christian hymnody in the century before 1820 suggests a very different outlook. Who has not sung, 'Lo He comes with clouds descending, once for favoured sinners slain'? These are the lyrics of John Cennick (1718-1755), a Methodist hymn writer who latterly preached for the Moravians.¹¹ Or Charles Wesley's lyrics in 'Rejoice the Lord is King', a stanza of which is: 'Rejoice in Glorious Hope, Our Lord the Judge Shall Come'. Or John Newton's (1725-1807) lyrics, 'Day of judgment, day of wonders, hark the trumpet's awful sound', a second stanza of which says, 'See the judge, our nature wearing, clothed in awful majesty'. Earnest Christians in the century before 1820 were certainly singing about Christ's visible physical return. Their critics denied them credit for doing so.

C. Responsible Biblical Interpretation of Key N.T. Passages

And why would not have evangelical Christians been singing these lyrics which focused upon the visible, bodily return of the Lord, from heaven? Responsible biblical interpreters of the eighteenth century had, with fair consistency, interpreted key New Testament texts as pointing to nothing less than this. For simplicity of argument, we will here identify several 'pillar passages' of the New Testament all bearing on the question of Christ's future visible return. I am selecting:

- Matthew 24:30 in which Jesus said, 'all the people of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with great power and glory'
- Acts 1:11 in which two men dressed in white instruct the disciples, 'this same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven, shall come back in the same way'

¹⁰ In this connection, we may also allude to the fact that Gothic cathedral main entry arches (the 'typanum') as well as religious art, such as Michelangelo's 'Last Judgment' within the Sistine Chapel, drew attention to the visible, physical return of Christ to the world confessed in these ancient creeds.

¹¹ Hymnologists such as John Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology* (New York: Scribners, 1892), p. 681, indicate that this hymn had some verses supplied by Charles Wesley.

- 1 Thessalonians 4:16 in which Paul instructs the Thessalonians ‘the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God’
- Hebrews 9:27, 28 in which the writer explains ‘He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him’¹²

If Irving, Drummond, and Way were correct in their assertions that there was currently no clear belief in the visible return of the Lord, we should expect to find representative biblical interpreters hedging in their treatment of N.T. statements such as these. But this is not what we find.

Matthew 24:30 ‘Coming on the Clouds of Heaven’

Commenting on Matthew 24:30 in his *Paraphrase and Commentary on the N.T.* first published in 1703, Daniel Whitby (1638-1726) — classified by most as a latitudinarian Anglican divine — was inclined to conclude that this was a metaphorical description of the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. In this he followed Josephus’ *Jewish War*.¹³ That Whitby accepted a physical return of Christ will be shown as we proceed to examine other passages. In contrast to Whitby, Matthew Henry (1662-1714), a Presbyterian who was almost certainly familiar with Whitby’s commentary, writing around 1710, was certain that this Olivet discourse contained a clear reference to the return of Christ:

The glorious appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ who will then show himself *the brightness of his Father’s glory and the express image of his person* (emphasis his) will darken the sun and moon as a candle is darkened in the beams of the noon-day sun.¹⁴

Composing his *Family Expositor*, which was released in six volumes beginning in 1739, the Congregationalist, Philip Doddridge (1702-1751), evidently had read Whitby and Josephus; like Whitby, Doddridge was inclined to the view that Matthew 24:30 referred to first century occur-

¹² All quotations are given from the NIV (2011).

¹³ Daniel Whitby, *Paraphrase and Commentary on the New Testament* (1703) incorporated into John Rogers Pitman and others, *A Critical Commentary and Paraphrase on the Old and New Testament and the Apocrypha* (London: Priestly, 1822), p. 196.

¹⁴ Matthew Henry, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols (Tappan, N.J.: Revell, n.d.), V, 358.

rences.¹⁵ Thomas Scott (1747-1821) the Anglican minister and commentator — cited by Bebbington as an example of one who expected no physical second advent, was measured in the interpretation given in his *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, a 1781 work initially issued in 174 weekly instalments, before being bound together.¹⁶ He allowed:

The language of these verses is suited, and was probably intended to lead the mind of the reader to the consideration of the end of the world and the coming of Christ to judgment; yet the expressions [...] must restrict the primary sense of them to the destruction of Jerusalem.¹⁷

Here is a somewhat muted affirmation of the physical return of Christ; while it is allowed, it is not found to be taught unambiguously in this Scripture. But Scott would be outdone by his Church of England contemporary, Charles Simeon of Cambridge. In his exposition of the Synoptic parallel to Matthew 24 in Mark 13, Simeon found a reference to Christ's physical second coming:

Two things are indispensable for all who would behold his face in peace, namely, 'repentance towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.' These must be experienced by you: neither the one nor the other can be dispensed with. Get a deep repentance therefore, and a lively faith: and rest not in any state short of that which the Scriptures require, and the primitive Christians actually attained.¹⁸

The picture becomes even more distinct when we consider a second major Scripture.

Acts 1:11 'This Same Jesus'

Commenting on Acts 1:11, in his *Paraphrase and Commentary on the N.T.* in 1703, Daniel Whitby (1638-1726) wrote:

We are told in 2 Thessalonians 1.7, 8 that he is to come down from heaven with his holy angels in a flame of fire and in 1 Thessalonians 4.16, 17 that he

¹⁵ Philip Doddridge, *The Family Expositor*, 6 vols (Charlestown, MA: Etheridge, 1807), II, 49.

¹⁶ s.v. "Scott, Thomas", in *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography*, ed. by Donald M. Lewis, II, 989-91.

¹⁷ Thomas Scott, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible* (New York: Dodge & Sayre, 1816). The edition lacks pagination.

¹⁸ Charles Simeon, *Horae Homilecticae*, <<https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/shh/mark-13.html>> [accessed 17 September 2020].

is to come down from heaven and snatch us to the clouds [...] He will come in a cloud of glory, in his body.¹⁹

Matthew Henry who (unlike Whitby) had found Matthew 24:30 an unambiguous reference to the second advent wrote:

This same Jesus shall come again in his own person, clothed with a glorious body; this same Jesus who came once to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself will appear a second time without sin (Heb. 9.26, 28); he who came once in disgrace to be judged, will come again in glory to judge.²⁰

The Congregationalist, Doddridge took up the same passage in his *Family Expositor* and paraphrased the words of the two angelic visitors, 'this same Jesus' as:

There will be a time when He shall visit your earth once more and so come in a visible form, riding on a cloud as on a triumphant chariot, accompanied by angelic guards, in the same manner you have beheld him go into heaven.²¹

With such sentiments, commentator Thomas Scott was in agreement. On the same utterance of the angelic messengers, he commented:

For though he was now ascended to his glorious throne in heaven, to return no more to reside on earth in his former condition, yet he would assuredly come at length in a visible manner, in the clouds of heaven, to judge the world, and to gather to himself all his believing people.²²

Charles Simeon concurred in an exposition of Acts 1:9-11. He found there a straightforward indication of the future visible return of Christ:

Of this our blessed Lord himself has spoken fully. "The Son of man shall be seen coming in the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory." "He shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him: then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations; and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats [Note: Matthew 24:30; Matthew 25:31-32.]" This is the advent spoken

¹⁹ Daniel Whitby, *Paraphrase and Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 506.

²⁰ Henry, *Commentary*, VI, 8. The exposition of Acts was Henry's own. Comment on the remainder of the N.T. i.e. Romans through Revelation, was supplied, after Henry's decease, by ministers associated with Henry.

²¹ Doddridge, *Family Expositor*, III, 5.

²² Scott, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, on Acts 1:11 (unpaginated).

of also by St. Paul, who says, “The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God.”²³

It is apparent that though there was not consensus among the interpreters that the Olivet Discourse contained an unambiguous reference to the second advent as a physical event, this consensus existed unambiguously regarding this second Scripture.

1 Thessalonians 4:16: ‘The Lord Himself Will Descend’

On this statement of Scripture, which by its very emphatic form, ‘the Lord Himself’ (*autos hó kurios*) draws attention to the identity of the one who will return from heaven, Daniel Whitby is more reticent than you might expect. He does draw attention to the phrase, ‘the trumpet call of God’ as indicating the approach of divine judgment; but leaves the doctrinal implications of Paul’s statement about the descent of the Lord from heaven very underdeveloped.

Not so, Matthew Henry.²⁴ Unlike Whitby, who seemed almost blind to the doctrinal import of this statement of Paul, the Henry commentary faces this squarely:

He ascended into heaven after his resurrection and passed through these material heavens into the third heaven which must retain him until the restitution of all things; and then he will come again and appear in glory. He will descend from heaven into this our air. The appearance will be with pomp and power.²⁵

Similarly, Doddridge seizes on the import of the passage and exults in its implications:

The Lord himself, our great and blessed redeemer, arrayed in all his own glory and that of his Father, shall in that great day descend from heaven with a triumphant shout raised by millions of happy attendant spirits. His appearance shall be proclaimed by the voice of an archangel.²⁶

These sentiments are also those of Thomas Scott, who paraphrased Paul’s statement thus:

²³ Simeon, *Horae Homilecticae*, on Acts 1:9-11, <<https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/shh/acts-1.html>> [accessed 17 September 2020].

²⁴ The introduction which is provided in full editions of the Matthew Henry *Commentary* indicate that this portion of the exposition was brought to completion after Henry’s demise by Daniel Mayo.

²⁵ Henry, *Commentary*, VI, 785.

²⁶ Doddridge, *Family Expositor*, V, 316.

At that solemn period, the Lord Jesus will be seen to descend from heaven with the acclamations of attendant angels who will be appointed to lead the hierarchies of heaven on this illustrious occasion, and with the trumpet of God.²⁷

However, having said this much, it needs to be acknowledged that Charles Simeon's recorded comment and paraphrase on this Scripture lays its emphasis upon the certainty of the believer's future resurrection, rather than the divine visitation by which it will be secured. Having noted this, we can still acknowledge Simeon's comment which addresses the substance:

When Jesus came in his state of humiliation, thousands withstood his voice: but none will, when he shall come in his own glory, and the glory of his Father, with his holy angels. The great and mighty, as well as the mean and insignificant, shall come forth alike, each re-united to his kindred body, and each appearing in his own proper character.²⁸

Hebrews 9:27, 28: 'He will appear a second time, not to bear sin'

It is somewhat un-nerving to find that Daniel Whitby, a respected commentator, found nothing worth commenting on here as regards last things.²⁹ It is after all, the chief basis for Christians speaking of a 'second coming' of Jesus Christ.

The continuator of Matthew Henry³⁰ clearly saw more of significance in these assertions in *Hebrews* than did Whitby:

Observe, it is the distinguishing character of true believers that they are looking for Christ: they look for him by faith; they look for him by hope and holy desires; they look for him in every duty, in every ordinance, in every providence now; and they expect his second coming and are preparing for it; and though it will be sudden destruction to the rest of the world, who scoff at the report of it, it will be eternal salvation to those who look for it.³¹

Philip Doddridge similarly saw matter of urgent importance in the text. He urged his readers:

27 Scott, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, II, n.p.

28 Charles Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, <<https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/shh/1-thessalonians.html>> [accessed 17 September 2020].

29 Whitby, *Paraphrase and Commentary* in Pitman, *A Critical Commentary and Paraphrase*, p. 375.

30 Henry's contemporary, William Tong wrote this section of the *Commentary*.

31 Henry, *Commentary*, VI, 930.

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Let it (i.e. the prospect of His return) engage us to make immediate application to Christ as the great Saviour, with entire submission to his princely authority; for if that be disregarded, how shall we meet him as Judge? For when he appears the second time for the salvation of his people, he will exercise righteous judgement on his enemies and that vengeance can never appear so terrible as when considered as coming from the mouth of him who was once manifested to take away every sin by the sacrifice of himself.³²

So also Thomas Scott, who urged:

He will at last appear in another form, in all of his personal and mediatorial glory as the omnipotent, omniscient and righteous judge of the world in order to complete the salvation of all who believe in Him, wait for His coming, and prepare to meet Him.³³

Finally, Charles Simeon devoted an entire exposition to the passage, verses 26-28, which he saw to be full of significance:

As the high-priest, while offering the annual sacrifices, was clothed only in plain linen garments, but when he had completed his sacrifice, came forth in his splendid robes to bless the people [Note: Leviticus 16:23-24. with 8:7, 9 and Numbers 6:23-24.]; so our great High-priest will put off the garb of humiliation, and shine forth in all his majesty and glory [Note: Matthew 25:31.]

Thus, having surveyed five Bible commentators across the eighteenth century leading up to the denunciations of Drummond, Irving and Way, we have not found any general discounting of belief in a visible and physical return of Christ to the world. Even the latitudinarian Anglican, Whitby, allowed that this is what *some* major N.T. passages point towards (though he was less industrious than others we have named in finding N.T. references to it).

With this much said, there remains a problem: it is that the early nineteenth century premillennialists Drummond, Irving and Way *perceived* there to be a deficiency of conviction about Christ's return. When there is such ample evidence pointing in another direction, we are entitled to ask what has clouded the picture so much. There were at least two things clouding the picture, and each had to do with the contemporary understanding of future divine judgment. Let us consider how the second advent had been treated by eighteenth century theologians of two types.

³² Doddridge, *Family Expositor*, VI, 69, 70.

³³ Scott, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, II, n.p.

V. CHRIST'S RETURN TO JUDGE IN POST-REFORMATION
PROTESTANT THEOLOGY AND IN THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT**A. In Post-Reformation Protestant Theology**

Consistent with the ancient creeds (which properly anticipate a return of Christ in triumph, from God's right hand)³⁴ as well as the Reformation confessions and catechisms,³⁵ eighteenth century evangelical believers were taught to expect a glorious return of Christ at world's end. When it did occur, this development would represent the final stage in the glorification or rehabilitation, before a watching world, of the divine saviour who had been so sadly rejected at his first coming. A Scripture commonly introduced into discussions about this future event was the saying of Paul before the Areopagus at Athens: 'God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.'³⁶ That there would be a future divine judgment, that it had been entrusted to Jesus Christ the God-man, and that it would take place on this earth seems to have been the common conviction of Christians in the preceding century, as in the centuries before. One can find this conviction elaborated by a wide variety of doctrinal writers in this period.

So, for example:

The Calvinistic Church of England Cambridge theologian, John Edwards (1637-1717) addressed the theme in his *Theologia Reformata* (1713). Treating major Christian doctrines as reflected in the Apostles' Creed, Ten Commandments and Lord's Prayer, he took up the return of Christ in connection with creedal affirmation VII, 'From thence He shall come to judge'. Edwards was eager to demonstrate that none is better qualified to be the judge of the world than Christ:

This is the reward of his sufferings here. It is fit that he who was himself judged and condemned for the sins of the world, should be the judge of it. Particularly his Honour is engaged, That those who condemned him be condemned by him. This without question is intended by our Saviour, when being carried before Caiaphas, the ecclesiastical judge, he made no answer but this, "Hereafter shall ye see the Son of Man sitting on the right-hand of the power, and coming in the Clouds of Heaven", clearly intimating that his future judging of the world [...].³⁷

³⁴ Note fn.5 supra.

³⁵ So for example, *Westminster Confession of Faith* XXXIII, 'Of the Last Judgment', *Westminster Shorter Catechism* Q.28.

³⁶ Acts 17:31.

³⁷ John Edwards, *Theologia Reformata* (London: John Lawrence, 1713), I, 461.

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The Congregationalist, Thomas Ridgley (1667-1734) in his *Body of Divinity* (1731) develops at length the fact that Christ's second advent will be a public and unavoidable spectacle:

We are now to consider that glory with which Christ shall appear, when he comes to judge the world. It is said, he shall come in the full manifestation of his own glory, and of his Father's, with all his holy angels, and with other circumstances which will be very awful and tremendous.³⁸

Ridgley's contemporary, the Scot, Thomas Boston (1676-1732) penned similar thoughts in his *Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion* (published 1767). Boston emphasized that the visibility of Christ's return would be one of the unmistakable features of the return:

He shall come with observation, in the view of the whole assembled world: for all the kindreds of the earth shall on that day see this mighty Personage with their bodily eyes. None of all the sons and daughters of Adam can possibly avoid this wonderful sight. "Behold he cometh with clouds, and every eye shall see him, and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him," Rev. i. 7.³⁹

The Baptist, John Gill (1697-1771) in his *Body of Divinity* (1767) develops the second coming of Christ under seven characteristics, the fourth of which is:

the visibility of Christ's personal appearance; he will appear in human nature; and every eye shall see him, Matt. xxiv. 27, so that he will be seen by all the tribes, kindreds, and nations of the earth.⁴⁰

And finally, (for this purpose), the most popular and influential evangelical theologian of the eighteenth century, the Congregationalist, Philip Doddridge (1702-1751). His *Lectures on Pneumatology, Ethics and Divinity* circulated widely both in manuscript and (after 1763) in print. Doddridge's treatment is of interest for more than one reason. His treatment of Christ's return to the world is now part of a discussion of 'last things', rather than (as previously) what could be called the 'states' of Christ. His

³⁸ Thomas Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity*, 2 vols (1731; reprinted New York: Carter and Brothers, 1855), I, 631. The structure of Ridgley's work was provided by the questions and answers of the Westminster Larger Catechism.

³⁹ Thomas Boston, *An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, 3 vols (1767; reprinted London: William Baynes, 1812), II, 97.

⁴⁰ John Gill, *A Body of Divinity* (1767: reprinted Philadelphia: Delaplaine and Hellings, 1810), p. 422.

subject is, 'What shall pass at the end of the world, so far as Scripture gives us an account of this?' He begins by asserting:

The Lord Jesus shall descend with visible pomp and majesty, attended by the blessed angels who will probably be employed as the instruments of some loud and extraordinary sound, called in Scripture the 'trump of God' or the voice of the archangel. This appearance shall be attended by the resurrection of the dead.⁴¹

In sum, we may say that in the first half of the eighteenth century, Jesus Christ's visible return is straightforwardly introduced on Scriptural grounds as the reversal of his earlier humiliation, as the instrument of the last judgment, and as exhibiting his sovereign rule over the last things. This last concept, in particular, is one which will steadily grow as the eighteenth century gives way to the nineteenth. We may therefore ask, 'were not the likes of Irving, Drummond and Way aware of this solid doctrinal teaching in the preceding century?' We cannot know this. But in any case, there was a lacuna in such teaching.

The practical difficulty was that eighteenth century, Christians had not the faintest idea as to when any of this might happen because they had been largely taught an understanding of the last things that reckoned that the last judgment and the return of Christ would only happen after an extended period during which the gospel is victorious in the world as it is spread by messengers empowered by the Holy Spirit. This outlook which one author has called 'The Puritan Hope',⁴² while driven by a laudable optimism about the prospects of the Gospel in the world, did nothing to nourish the hope of any near return of Christ. As long as the advance of the Gospel could be observed across the world, it seemed to follow that the judgment day and its precondition, the return of Christ, lay somewhere ahead in the indefinite future. There was just dawning in the age of William Carey the greatest period of global missionary expansion that the Western world had seen, to that date; Latourette called it 'the great century'.⁴³

⁴¹ Philip Doddridge, *A Course of Lectures on Pneumatology, Ethics and Divinity*, 2 vols (1763; reprinted London: Robinson, 1799), II, 441.

⁴² Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1971) demonstrates that this post-millennial vision of the Christian future motivated missionary effort from the Puritan age of the mid-17th century until the late 19th century.

⁴³ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 7 vols (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1946). Vol. IV (covering the 19th century) was given this designation.

Charles Simeon, writing on Acts 1:11 ('this same Jesus whom you have seen go into heaven') in 1828 only made explicit what myriads of others had embraced for over a century. Answering the question, 'when may we look for the Lord's return?'

the Lord Jesus Christ may certainly be expected to come again, *after the manner of his departure* from this lower world [Note: οὕτως ὃν τρόπον.] at the period of the Millennium, to establish his kingdom — Christ laid the foundation of his kingdom in the Apostolic age: and it has been maintained and carried forward, even to the present day. But there is a time coming, when all the kingdoms of the world shall be subdued unto him, and he alone shall reign over the face of the whole earth [Note: Daniel 2:44.]. That I apprehend to be the season called, in Scripture, "the times of the restitution of all things;" till which period the heavens have received him: but when that period shall have arrived, he will again be sent, after the manner of his departure hence [Note: Acts 3:20-21] in power and great glory.⁴⁴

Here, we begin to come close to the source of the aggravation to which our angular premillennialists gave vent. They argued as if their fellow evangelicals had no definite expectation of Christ's return at all when the underlying disagreement was actually about the knowability of the nearness of this event. The angular premillennialists had had their eye on the social and political upheavals of the French Revolution and Napoleonic era; they had already reached the conclusion that these were developments which signalled the approach of the end inasmuch as the church is to be rescued from perils (such as the upheavals of France), rather than basking in prosperity at Christ's return.⁴⁵

B. In 18th Century Enlightenment Protestant Theology

If this analysis goes some way to explain the sense of premillennialist aggravation expressed in the early nineteenth century, there is also a second line of interpretation which can also be explored. That is that in the second half of the eighteenth century, otherwise orthodox Christian

⁴⁴ Simeon, *Horae Homilecticae* on Acts 1:9-11, <<https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/shh/acts-1.html>> [accessed 17 September 2020]. It is interesting to note that in Simeon's extended exposition he holds as an open question both 1) whether Christ's return to the world to judge might be a distinguishable occasion from the onset of the millennium and 2) whether the inauguration of the millennium would be set in motion either by Christ in person or by the agency of the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁵ W.H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 13.

theologians (evangelicals among them) come under greater and greater felt pressure to demonstrate that Christian doctrine meets the standard of 'reasonableness'. They acknowledged on the one hand that there are certain doctrines which may be known solely by divine revelation (the deity of Christ, for example). Yet they maintained that those Christian doctrines are surest which have, in addition to scriptural warrant, the concurrence of reason. As this affected the Christian consideration of last things, it led to some unforeseen developments. Christian theologians were confident in asserting that there would be a final judgment, because both Scripture and the universal sense of justice, present in all cultures and religions, called out for such a reckoning and for the lasting consequences following from it. But in such efforts to commend the idea of a universal last things, affecting all civilizations and cultures and yielding enduring repercussions, one can find Christian theologies actually diminishing or erasing the role of Jesus Christ as judge. Jesus Christ's own resurrection from the dead (a truth which we know by inscripturated revelation) is in fact the pattern and guarantee of our own resurrection.⁴⁶ But in the determination to establish last things on this preferred 'reasonable basis', the role of Jesus Christ descending from heaven as the agent of resurrection and the judge of all peoples was made to recede. The emphases of the first half of the eighteenth century on Jesus Christ's role in the day of resurrection and judgment were still being sounded by authors such as Samuel Stanhope Smith (1751-1819), the president of the College of New Jersey (from 1896, Princeton University) and Archibald Alexander (1772-1851), first professor in Princeton Seminary.⁴⁷ Contemporary Congregationalist theologians, Timothy Dwight (1752-1817) and David Bogue (1750-1825) sounded the same notes.⁴⁸ Yet, there were some generally orthodox theo-

⁴⁶ The author is very much indebted to James P. Martin, *The Last Judgment from Orthodoxy to Ritschl* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), p. 49; 'General proofs for a Last Judgment, which could be assumed on a rationalistic basis, prevailed over a thoroughgoing Christological interpretation.'

⁴⁷ Samuel Stanhope Smith, *A Comprehensive View of the Leading Principles of Natural and Revealed Religion*, 2nd edn (New Brunswick: Deare and Myer, 1816), pp. 501-19; Archibald Alexander, *A Brief Compend of Bible Truth* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1846), pp. 194-200.

⁴⁸ David Bogue's *Theological Lectures*, published posthumously in 1849, represented his lecturing in a theological academy at Gosport, Hampshire from 1789 until his death in 1825. David Bogue, *Theological Lectures*, 2 vols (New York: Lewis Colby, 1849), I, 264-70. One finds the same Christ-centred view of last things in the theological sermons of Timothy Dwight (1752-1817), published as *Theology Explained and Defended*, 5 vols (1818-19; reprinted New York: Carville, 1830), IV, 430-55, note especially p. 443.

logians who seemed to emphasize only those last things to which reason would give its assent. Thus George Hill (1750-1819), professor of Divinity in St. Andrews from 1788, left *Lectures in Divinity* which circulated widely on both sides of the Atlantic. These affirmed the resurrection of Christ as true and historic; yet by the conclusion of his lectures, Hill had confined all consideration of the future to a mere three pages and utterly skirted the question of Christ's role in the last things.⁴⁹ His pupil, Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847), professor of theology at Edinburgh from 1828, who is accurately considered as more evangelical than his teacher, chose to avoid the subject of last things entirely.⁵⁰

We may find this marginalization hard to fathom; but at the same time we should recognize that our own contemporary theological reflection upon last things also takes place in a definite cultural and intellectual setting. Our setting is one which disdains anything which is perceived as particularistic or discriminating; the thought that Christ could or would judge the world is deeply troublesome to many. For such reasons, forms of universalism are increasingly attractive to some professed Christians, as well as others.

⁴⁹ So, George Hill, *Lectures in Divinity* (1821; reprinted New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1851), p. 680. See biographical details of Hill in the article, 'Hill, George' in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, ed. by Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1993), pp. 407-08.

⁵⁰ Thus Thomas Chalmers' *Institutes of Theology* (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable, 1849) volume II, never reaches the subject of judgment and resurrection. The *Institutes of Theology*, published posthumously after his death in 1847, reflected lectures Chalmers had been giving since 1828 in the University of Edinburgh and subsequently in the New College of the Free Church of Scotland. Early on in this Edinburgh professorship, Chalmers had used the *Lectures of Hill* as the basis of his instruction. Cf. Chalmers' *Institutes of Theology*, II, 261-64. Chalmers had earlier close associations with Edward Irving when, Irving served 1820-1822 as his Glasgow assistant. This was prior to the latter's removal from Scotland to London. Some of these linkages are explored in Crawford Gribben, 'Andrew Bonar and the Scottish Presbyterian Millennium', in *Prisoners of Hope? Aspects of Evangelical Millennialism in Britain and Ireland, 1800-1880*, ed. by C. Gribben, & T. Stunt (Paternoster: Carlisle, 2006), pp. 177-202. The orientation of Hill and his influence upon Chalmers has recently been explored by Mark W. Elliot, 'Natural and Revealed Theology in Hill and Chalmers', in *The History of Scottish Theology*, ed. by D. Ferriusson and Mark W. Elliott, 3 vols (Oxford: OUP, 2019), II, 170-85.

CONCLUSION

Drummond, Irving and Way misrepresented matters when they claimed in 1828 that their evangelical contemporaries did not believe in Christ's return. Of two examples (from Thomas Scott and Charles Simeon) which are suggested to lend credibility to their complaint, we have contradictory evidence provided by Simeon's own words.⁵¹ As for Scott's conversational openness to there being no necessity of a physical return of Christ, his published commentaries provide ample evidence that whatever he may have allowed to be possible, conversationally, was at the same time inconsistent with his published remarks intended to explain major New Testament passages. We are therefore amply justified in insisting that the doctrine of the visible, personal return of Jesus Christ was no novelty in late Georgian England.

⁵¹ In addition to Simeon's published expositions of N.T. passages bearing on Christ's second advent cited above, we may stress here that the passage cited from William Carus, *Memoirs of the Life of Charles Simeon* (London: Hatchard & Sons, 1856), p. 658 as indicating lack of conviction on Simeon's part does not in fact show this. Simeon indicates in that place that he was indifferent to the contemporary claim (likely made by the critics cited by Bebbington) that Jesus would return to the world to set up a personal earthly reign, not the second advent itself.