

Reflections on the Delay of Christ's Return by Larry Kirkpatrick

In connection with the SDA Adult SS Quarterly Studies of 4Q 2002

On Matthew 25:1-13 and 2 Peter 3:3-15 titled, "Hope and 'The Delay,'" pts 1, 2

Last-Generation or Closure Theology

Whenever the topic of the "delayed" Second Coming of Jesus comes up in Adventism, it is usually attacked. In short, it simply says that "When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own" (Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 69). It says that the last days of this church will see a movement that will permit God to demonstrate through His people the effectual power of God to transform lives and make fallen humans safe to save.

History and Development

This theme is found both in the Bible and in the writings of Ellen G. White. In Christian history it was developed mostly following the great disappointment of 1844. The works of Ellen G. White, A.T. Jones, and E.J. Waggoner were its seedbed. M.L. Andreason brought more of it together, and it flowered in the Annual Council Appeals of the General Conference of 1973-1974 and through the writings of Herbert Douglass. Dennis Priebe and others today also aggressively present this view.

Main Biblical Foundations

Among the primary Scriptural sources of these teachings are events

surrounding the exodus, the parable of Matthew 25:1-13, the harvest principle of Mark 4:29, the concept of hastening in 2 Peter 3:12, and texts in Revelation 14.

Hermeneutical Concerns

Matthew 25:1-13 is a parable, and as such it addresses one main point. We do not want to try to press every aspect of this parable and try to derive numerous points from every possible detail. William Miller's principles of interpretation offer the following:

"5. God has revealed things to come, by visions, in figures and parables; and in this way the same things are oftentimes revealed again and again, by different visions, or in different figures and parables. If you wish to understand them, you must combine them all in one. Psalm 89:19; Hosea 12:10; Habakkuk 2:2; Acts 2:17; 1 Corinthians 10:6; Hebrews 9:9, 24; Psalm 78:2; Matthew 13:13, 34; Genesis 41:1-32; Daniel 2, 7, 8; Acts 10:9-16."

Therefore we want to study this text both for what it says in particular but also to see that teaching in connection with other pertinent elements, such as the Exodus.

The Parable Studied

The main teaching of the parable is that vigilance in personal readiness is necessary in light of the events God

immediately desires to bring to pass. It does not teach everything there is to be known about the delay. For example, in this parable the Lord delays His coming for reasons unclear to the bridesmaids. But in the Exodus (and in Closure Theology), events are delayed because of the unfaithfulness of God's people. The entry of the Hebrews into the promised land was delayed 40 years by their insubordination.

Herbert Douglass' Reflections

These were excerpted from <http://www.spectrummagazine.org/church/ss/021125douglass.html> (Normally Spectrum an unsound source for serious Adventism, but Elder Douglass' thoughts following in this subheading are a happy exception to that rule):

- * Both the wise and foolish bridesmaids share common doctrines.
- * The "delay" is a built-in concept that Seventh-day Adventists are privileged to understand—Jesus could have come "ere this."
- * The difference between the two groups lies in what the shared doctrines have done for them personally.
- * The lamp exists for one purpose—to make light happen. The light is neither the lamp nor the oil.
- * The light is the witness of the Christlike life, transformed by the Holy Spirit, molded by biblical principles.
- * Foolish bridesmaids are lost because they made biblical information an end, instead of a means to an end. Faith became an intellectual exercise instead of a personal relationship of joyful, trusting obedience. They know what the Bible says about God but did not know him as their personal Friend.

* Wise bridesmaids are ready for the Advent because the Bible became the instrument by which they listen to God personally, leading them to say "Yes" to whatever God says.

* The difference between the two groups may not be easily distinguished in times of ease. But the wise woke up, sensing the emptiness of their spiritual experience and determined to change by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

* Just as no one can breathe for another, so no one can trust for another.

* When the Bridegroom comes, doctrinal awareness will not substitute for character that shines as a reflection of Jesus. "Character is not transferable" (Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 412).

* Somewhere in the lives of the foolish they were saying "No" to known duty. They were rebels at heart; they did not act on what they knew.

* How sad that the foolish church members "are shut out from heaven by their own unfitness for its companionship" (ibid., 413).

Attacks on the Delay Theory

Those who abhor the concept that God's people have delayed Christ's return prefer to take texts such as Matthew 25:1-13 and isolate them from other Scriptures. They then teach that we as a people have not delayed Christ's return and that its time cannot be known and that we cannot speed its arrival or delay its approach. Some even take Luke 12:25 and say that to speak of a delay in Christ's coming classes us with the wicked servant who expects a delay in his Lord's return and uses the delay to live riotously and treat the other servants with violence.

These are anxious to avoid the implications of the Seventh-day Adventist message. They realize that our Lord's message cannot be reconciled with the non-Adventist theologies they have relentlessly endeavoring to graft into this faith. No place exists in popular evangelical theology for this teaching of last generation character perfection. You won't find it in Philip Yancey. Today we should study this concept afresh and renew our understanding of it. How much sooner might Jesus come if we, rather than standing in the way, let the valleys be exalted and every mountain and hill be made low, and prepare the way for our Lord.

Excerpts From 1973-1974 General Conference Appeals

1973

We believe that the return of Jesus has been long delayed, that the reasons for the delay are not wrapped in mysteries, and that the primary consideration before the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to reorder its priorities individually and corporately so that our Lord's return may be hastened.

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Because the latter rain experience has not yet come, delegates at this Annual Council have been driven to the conclusion that the message of Christ to the Laodiceans has not been clearly understood or adequately heeded. The climax of the sequence of events predicted in the following quotation has not been reached, indicating that there is yet need for a people to fulfill the requirements of

the True Witness: "Those who come up to every point, and stand every test, and overcome, be the price what it may, have heeded the council of the True Witness, and they will receive the latter rain, and thus be fitted for translation." -Testimonies, vol. 1, p. 187.

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1974

Christ-reflecting lives are essential to the gospel outreach. The more a church member becomes like Christ in character, the more gracious, winsome, and genuinely helpful he will be in his general soul-winning activities, especially in his relationships within his own home and neighborhood. When a generation of Seventh-day Adventists is truly serious about becoming exhibits of what God's grace can do, the moment of final decision by the whole world for or against God will not be long delayed.

The moment of final decision for mankind the world over, often called the close of probation, is long overdue. God has wanted to complete His work on earth at several significant moments since 1844, but many of His people have failed to understand what He waits for; others have been unwilling to cooperate. "God has a people upon the earth who in faith and holy hope are tracing down the roll of fast-fulfilling prophecy and are seeking to purify their souls by obeying the truth, and that they may not be found without the wedding garment when Christ shall appear" (Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, vol. 4, pp. 306, 307).