



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 18 [MB Confession of Faith]

Christ's Final Triumph

COMMENTARY

The apostle Peter saw the beginning of the last days in the outpouring of the Spirit of the risen Christ on the first Christian Pentecost. Quoting the prophet Joel, he explained, "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (Acts 2:17). The coming of the Spirit marked the completion of Christ's redemptive work on earth, and so one can say that the first coming of Christ inaugurated the last days. "In these last days," said the writer to the Hebrews, "he has spoken to us by his Son" (1:2).

The Last Days

John in his first epistle told his readers that they were living in "the last hour" (2:18). Writing to the Corinthians, Paul reminded the church that "the time is short" (1 Cor. 7:29), and Peter said "the end of all things is near" (1 Pet. 4:7). James also underscored that believers in the first century were living in the last days. "Be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near" (5:8). And the writer to the Hebrews wanted believers to encourage one another "all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:25). In the last book of the Bible we have several references to the brevity of this interim between the first and second coming of Christ (Rev. 1:1; 22:7, 20).

From the first century on the church has lived in what the New Testament writers call "the last days." They were inaugurated by Christ's saving work and the outpouring of the Spirit, and they will end when he returns in glory. During this interim the church carries out its mission in the world. The church's witness to Jesus as the only way of salvation often leads to persecution and intense suffering, as Jesus predicted. The seer of Patmos saw the saints coming home to glory "out of the great tribulation" (Rev. 7:14). In spite of suffering, the church triumphs in the end because Christ conquered all evil powers by his death and resurrection.

A question that often puzzles believers is: How could the end of this age be near in New Testament times, when Christ has not yet come after 2,000 years of waiting? To that we can only say that God views time differently from the way we do. With Him a thousand years are like a day, and a day is like a thousand years (2 Pet. 3:8). Believers always live at the borderline between this world and the next, and for that reason they are encouraged to be spiritually awake at all times, ready to meet the Lord when he comes.

Death

Although Christ by his resurrection broke the power of death, death is the last enemy to be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26). And so, as the return of Christ at the end of the age is delayed, believers must die. A great many will be alive when the Lord comes (1 Thess. 4:15), but a great number have already died during this long time of waiting, working, and watching. Death confronts us not only at the end of life's journey, but we are conscious of death throughout life. And while believers naturally fear the process of dying, they are not "in slavery by their fear of death" (Heb. 2:15).

The biblical writers use a variety of figures of speech and euphemisms when they speak of the death of believers. It is seen as the dismantling of a tent (2 Cor. 5:1), a departure (Phil. 1:23; 2 Tim 4:6). "Sleep" is a common euphemism for death (1 Thess. 4:14, 1 Cor. 15:51). Dying is compared to undressing (2 Cor. 5:3,4), and to the sowing of seed in the ground (1 Cor. 15:42,43).



We do not have detailed information on the state of believers who die during this time, between the first and second advent of our Lord. However, we know that death cannot “separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38,39). Even in death Christians are said to be “in Christ” (1 Thess. 4:16; 1 Cor. 15:18). “Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord,” writes Paul (Rom. 14:8). The clearest statement on the intermediate state of the dead in Christ is found in Philippians 1:23, where Paul, facing martyrdom, boldly states: “I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.” If to be with Christ after death is far better than life here on earth, we can say with the apostle John, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on” (Rev. 14:13).

The Last Day

We do not know how long the last days, the end times, will be extended. However, we should not accuse God of delaying the second coming of Christ, for He extends this time of waiting in order to give people an opportunity to repent (2 Pet. 3:9). But when God’s hour strikes, the last days will come to an end with “the last day.”

Jesus spoke repeatedly of “the last day” (John 6:39, 44, 54; 12:48). This last day is also called “the consummation,” the wrap-up of this age (Matt. 13:39, 40, 49; 24:3; 28:20). Sometimes the last day is called simply “the day” (1 Thess. 5:5; 1 Cor 3:13; Heb. 10:25), which is really shorthand for “the day of the Lord” (1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:2). It is known also as “the great day” (Jude 6; Rev. 6:17; 16:14), and “the day of Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8; 2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 1:6; 2:16). It is both “the day of wrath” (Rom. 2:5), and “the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30). Also it is called “the end” (Mark 13:7; 1 Cor. 15:24).

How close we are to the end is not known, although, as Paul said already in the first century, “our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over, the day is almost here” (Rom. 13:11,12). Christians are warned not to try to set dates for the end of the age, the last day. “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). Christ will come as a thief in the night; that is, we cannot predetermine the time of his coming (1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10).

In Mennonite history there have been some sad incidents in which dates were set for the return of Christ. Since such predictions have always proved to be wrong, and since our Lord warned us not to set dates, we should be wary of all attempts to determine the imminence of Christ’s return by observing political, economic, or social developments in our society. Jesus did mention a number of “signs of the times,” but they are the kind of signs that attend the life of the church throughout the present age—persecution, famine, earthquakes, war, and the like. They are not meant to encourage speculation on the time of Christ’s second advent, but rather to make the followers of Christ aware of the kind of world in which they would carry out their mission (Mark 13:5-13).

When Christ returns at the end of the age, all the dead in Christ will rise, and the living saints will be transformed. “We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” (1 Cor. 15:51, 52 NRSV). This is called the first resurrection (Rev. 20: 5,6), for “the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.”

The bodies which we now have were designed by God for life on this earth, but “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 15:50). And so believers will be given new bodies when Christ returns, which are like “the body of his glory” (Phil. 3:21 NRSV). “What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15: 42-44 NRSV).

Millennium

The one passage in the Scriptures that mentions the millennial reign of Christ (Rev. 20:1-10) has been understood in different ways by Mennonite Brethren. Post-millennialism, in which it is thought that before Christ returns, this world will witness a golden age in which Christ is acknowledged as King, is not generally held by Bible readers in our churches.

Some Mennonite Brethren espouse amillennialism. According to this view Christ’s reign was inaugurated at his first coming. Satan is now bound and the spiritually dead are being raised to life and



enjoy the blessings of God's kingdom. At the end of the millennium (however long this period might be), Satan is loosed once more and he makes a final onslaught on God and His kingdom. But Satan and his followers are totally defeated and banished forever from the presence of God.

Pre-millennialism is more widely held by Mennonite Brethren. According to this understanding of Revelation 20, the millennium follows the second coming of Christ. However, there is diversity of thought on the nature of the millennium. Also, the thousand years are understood by some not mathematically but as a symbolic number. Because of these different views, and because our understanding of the millennium does not affect our daily life and mission in any significant way, Mennonite Brethren prefer not to include a particular view of the millennium in their Confession of Faith.

Judgment

Judgment is not a palatable subject, but if we want to be faithful to the Scriptures we cannot avoid this "elementary" doctrine (Heb. 6:1, 2). And whereas God's wrath against human wickedness is revealed from heaven even now in the judgments that strike humankind from time to time (Rom. 1:18), there will yet come a "day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom. 2:5 NRSV). In sermon and parable Jesus, the kindest person that ever lived on this earth, proclaimed loudly and clearly that a day of judgment was yet to come (Matt. 7:19; 8:12; 25:31-46; John 3:16; 5:29). The apostles too made it very clear that the ungodly "will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thess. 1:9 NRSV).

The Devil, the archenemy of humankind, and all his hangers-on will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone (Rev. 20:10), "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). The same fate awaits the Antichrist, who emerges at the end of the age, and whom Christ will destroy with the breath of his mouth (2 Thess. 2:8). Those who have rejected the gospel will suffer eternal punishment (2 Thess. 1:8, 1 Pet. 4:17) as will all apostates (Heb. 10:26,27). "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath" (John 3:36 NRSV). The punishment of the wicked is described in various ways. They are said to go to hell (Matt. 5:22, 29, 30; Mark 9:43, 45, 47). Hell is also called "the lake of fire" (Rev. 19:20; 20:14, 15). Jesus spoke of "the fire of hell" (Matt. 5:22). It is also a place of darkness "where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). It is called "the second death" (Rev. 20:6), punishment and destruction (2 Thess. 1:9, 1 Cor. 1:18). By contrast, believers are rescued "from the coming wrath" (1 Thess. 1:10 NRSV).

The Eternal Reign of God

Those who put their trust in Christ and his redeeming grace have the hope of eternal life. Jesus promised his disciples that he was preparing a place for them and that he would some day come and take them to himself (John 14:2-6). He calls this glorious place "my Father's house" (John 14:2) in which there are many rooms—room enough for all the saints of all the ages. When Christ comes in clouds of glory he will take those who belong to him home to glory, "and so we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thess. 4:17). The Father's house is "a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands" (2 Cor. 5:1). Jesus also spoke of the "eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:9).

This heavenly home of the saints is also known as paradise (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:4). "To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7 NRSV). In one of his parables Jesus uses a very Jewish figure of speech for heaven, calling it "Abraham's bosom" (Luke 16:22 KJV). People will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, says Jesus (Matt. 8:11,12). In Revelation 19 John describes the bliss of the redeemed in terms of a great wedding feast in which the Lamb and his bride celebrate their eternal union. One of the pictures of heaven that is expanded in some detail is that of the holy city, the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21, 22). This is "the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10). Throughout the ages the saints have looked forward to "the city that is to come" (Heb. 13:14), the heavenly Mount Zion (Rev. 14:1).

In this age we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7); we see by means of "a mirror dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12 NRSV), but when the last day comes we shall see Christ face to face. "We know that when he



appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). To see God is to see His glory. Jesus prayed that his followers might see the glory which he had before the foundation of the world (John 17:24). The sufferings of this life “are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). When we appear before Christ at the end of the age (2 Cor. 5:10), he will reward us for all that we did in his name. Each person will receive his or her rewards according to their labors (1 Cor 3:8). God will not overlook our work and our love for others (Heb. 6:10). When believers enter the gates of glory “they will rest from their labor” but “their deeds will follow them” (Rev. 14:13).

To be with Christ in glory means to experience joy at its deepest level. God will wipe away all tears (Rev. 7:17): “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4 NRSV). All of God’s children look forward to the day when they will “enter into the joy” of the Lord (Matt. 25:21, 23 NRSV). And while we wait for that day we have the assurance that God “is able to keep [us] from falling and to present [us] before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy” (Jude 24).

