

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The present interest in eschatology¹ owes much to J. Weiss and A. Schweitzer.² The question they raised was that of the overall structure and significance of New Testament eschatology, but this was bound to involve considerable examination of the idea of the Parousia in particular.

Surprisingly this renewal of interest has not fostered in the church a firmer conviction regarding the Parousia expectation. In fact the idea of the Parousia, at least in the form in which traditionally it has been expressed, has had to face many criticisms from various quarters.

From within the realm of critical theological investigation the Parousia hope has encountered considerable opposition. Schweitzer maintained that Jesus held to a Parousia hope only because it formed part of the contemporary Jewish apocalyptic which he accepted, and that such first century apocalyptic has no place in Christian thought. This view, introduced into this country with varying sympathy by W. Sanday and F. C. Burkitt,³ is expressed strongly to-day by M. Werner and others.⁴ An apologetic elimination of the Parousia hope, or at least a radical re-interpretation of its traditional expression, has flourished particularly in the

¹ For recent reviews of the eschatological thought of the past 50-60 years cf. e.g., J. W. Bowman, 'From Schweitzer to Bultmann', in *T.T.* XI 1954 pp. 160ff. G. R. Beasley-Murray, 'A Century of Eschatological Discussion', in *E.T.* LXIV 1953, pp. 312ff. D. J. Selby, 'Changing Ideas in N.T. Eschatology', in *H.T.R.* L 1957 pp. 21ff. W. D. Niven, 'After 50 Years: VI Eschatology and the Primitive Church', in *E.T.* L 1938-9 pp. 325ff. F. F. Bruce, 'Eschatology', in *L.Q.H.R.* 1958 pp. 99 ff. Fison, *Hope*, pp. 51ff. Kümmel, *Promise*, pp. 15ff. Rich, *Die Bedeutung*, pp. 1-3. Wilder, *Eschatology*, pp. 60ff. W. Schweitzer, *Eschatology and Ethics*.

² Cf. esp. Weiss, *Predigt* and *Urchristentum*; Schweitzer, *Quest* and *Mystery*.

³ Cf. Sanday, *Life*. Burkitt, *Beginnings*, and *Jesus Christ*. (Burkitt wrote the Preface to the English translation 'The Quest of the Historical Jesus').

⁴ Cf. Werner, *Formation*, and *Der protestantische Weg des Glaubens*, I, also U. Neuenschwander, *Protestantische Dogmatik der Gegenwart und das Problem der biblische Mythologie*. Buri, *Die Bedeutung*.

Anglo-Saxon world through the work of C. H. Dodd, followed by T. F. Glasson and J. A. T. Robinson.¹ A somewhat similar re-interpretation has been expressed on the Continent by E. von Dobschütz and R. Otto, and, most recently, by J. Jeremias.² Behind these views one can discern the pressure of evolutionistic materialism and of the whole secular climate of thought.³ Even more apparent is the pressure of a secular philosophy behind the re-interpretation of eschatology in terms of existentialism. This, not unheralded before 1939, has been expressed most radically and consistently during and following the second world war by R. Bultmann⁴ and has many adherents to-day.⁵

Other factors also have tended to weaken the church's Parousia hope. The contemporary concentration of the church on its worship directs attention away from a future end-expectation, and although this concentration is especially marked in Roman catholic circles⁶ it is not by any means unknown in Anglicanism.⁷

The church seems to have slackened its grasp upon the Parousia hope under pressure from materialistic thought,⁸ and western

¹ Cf. Dodd, *Parables; Preaching*. Glasson, *Advent*. Robinson, *In the End; Coming*. Also, Guy, *Last Things*. Duncan, *Jesus*. Sharman, *Son of Man*. Cadoux, *Theology*. Hunter, *Parables*.

² Cf. von Dobschütz, *Eschatology*. Otto, *Kingdom of God*. Jeremias, *Jesus als Weltvollender; Parables*.

³ e.g. Glasson, *Advent*, pp. 232ff. Robinson, *In the End*, pp. 17-24.

⁴ Cf. *Glauben und Verstehen; Offenbarung und Heiligeschehen*, — *Die Frage der natürlichen Offenbarung; New Testament and Mythology* (in *Kerygma*, ed. Bartsch); *Primitive Christianity*; 'History and Eschatology', in *N.T.S.* 1954, pp. 5-16; *History and Eschatology*.

⁵ Cf. esp. E. Fuchs, 'Die Frage'; 'Christus'. E. Lohse, 'Lukas als Theologe der Heilsgeschichte', in *Ev. T.* XIV 1954 pp. 256ff.; 'Zur N.T.' lichen Eschatologie', in *V.F.* 1956 (Jahresbericht 1953-55) pp. 184ff. Conzelmann, 'Gegenwart'; *Luke*. Bornkamm, *Jesus*; 'Enderwartung'. Käsemann, 'Problem'. Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology; Demythologizing*. Robinson, *New Quest; Mark. Kerygma*, ed. Bartsch I and II.

⁶ Cf. e.g. E. Quinn, 'The Kingdom of God and the Church in the Synoptic Gospels', in *Scripture* IV 1949-51, pp. 237ff.

⁷ Cf. Robinson, *Coming*, p. 15. Fison, *Hope*, p. 65 and below, p. 64.

⁸ Cf. Roberts, *Jesus*, pp. 115f. Cairns, *Image*, pp. 206ff. George, *Communion*, p. 25. G. Rupp, 'The Doctrine of Man: the Christian and Secular Eschatologies', in *E.T.* LXI 1950 pp. 100f. Reinhold Niebuhr, 'The Christian Faith and the Economic Life of Liberal Society', (in *Goals*, ed. A. Dudley Ward). D. L. Munby, *Christianity and Economic Problems*, pp. 267ff., gives a brief account of the relation of the christian parousia hope to economic and social thought.

capitalism, naturally biased towards conservatism, has hardly encouraged the church to re-affirm its hope in the impending judgement and renewal of the present world order.¹ Some recent 'bomb psychosis' has given rise to a form of secular apocalypticism to which, usually, the churches have responded with nervous indecision.²

Some sects have consistently maintained a Parousia hope, but too often their fanaticism (sometimes morbid, sometimes comic) and their concentration upon dates, has meant that they have failed to see or proclaim the implications of the impending end for present life, thought and obedience.³

Existentialist and materialistic philosophies have, however, succeeded in shaking the church's confidence in the Parousia hope (at least in the form 'he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead') generally only at an intellectual level. Certainly on the plane of general congregational life and thought there is a tendency to ignore the Parousia expectation. Following the Evanston Conference in 1954 some widespread interest in this theme was aroused,⁴ but this was only temporary. Yet there seems to be no parallel, on the congregational level, to the intellectual antagonism

¹ The idea of a future golden age is more readily acceptable on communist soil with its concern for the community and its forward direction (cf. E. Heimann, 'Comparative Economic Systems', in *Goals*, ed. A. Dudley Ward) than on the soil of private enterprise and the fulfilment of personal ends. The way in which Protestantism and capitalism readily co-exist (cf. Heimann's essay, above, and J. C. Bennett, 'A Theological Conception of Goals for Economic Life', in *Goals*, ed. A. Dudley Ward) is relevant for the assessment of Bultmann's popularity to-day (with its expressly individualist interest). Rich, *Die Bedeutung*, p. 21, rightly points out that there can be no private Parousia hope.

² Cf. J. Foster, 'Eschatology and the Hope of the New World', in *E.T.* LIV 1942-3, pp. 10 ff.

³ Cf. Glasson, *His Appearing and His Kingdom*, pp. 43ff.

⁴ The theme of the Conference was, 'Christ, the hope of the world'. Preparatory to it appeared:—Minear, *Christ the Hope of the World* (Bibliography); *The Meaning of Hope in the Bible* (Ecumenical Studies Geneva, 1952), being the report of two preparatory meetings convened by the Study department of the W.C.C., in Zetten (15-19 April, 1952) and in Drew University, U.S.A., (5-6 June, 1952); W. Schweitzer, *Eschatology* (Ecumenical Studies, Geneva, 1951); 'The Nature of Christian Hope', in *Ecumenical Review* 3, 1952, pp. 282f (being preparatory suggestions from Lesslie Newbigin, Edmund Schlunk, Roger Mehl and D. F. McKinnon); *T.T.*, Oct 1953, was devoted to the Evanston theme. See also the report, *Evanston Speaks*. Fison, *Hope*. Minear, *Christian Hope*. Brunner, *Eternal Hope*.

towards the traditional Parousia hope, and there is no general movement aimed at removing it from the creeds. Unfortunately there is little positive integration of the Parousia hope into the life, thought and work of the church.

This, surely, has resulted in a serious impoverishment of the church's witness. The conviction underlying this thesis is certainly that a real and extensive impoverishment *must* follow from a weak, indifferent or uninformed Parousia hope, or from the abandonment—for whatever reason—of the Parousia expectation altogether. The intense urgency with which the church should undertake its tasks of repentance and of missionary proclamation of the gospel, is weakened if not entirely lost. This thesis, therefore, seeks to pose and probe again the question as to the authenticity of the Parousia hope in the New Testament.

We begin (in chapter 2) with the background of the New Testament expectation, tracing the hopes expressed in the Old Testament and inter-testamental periods. Then we examine recent views which evacuate the Parousia hope of its traditional place and significance.

First (in chapter 3) we discuss the thesis maintained by Schweitzer and others that Jesus held to an expectation which, by subsequent events, was proved false; and that the church from the first has failed to appreciate the true significance of this (so-called) "life of misunderstanding". They assert that not the Parousia hope but the example of living with an unfulfilled vision, is the inspiration of Christ's life and death for to-day. But this assertion we find altogether inadequate.

Next (in chapter 4) we examine the thesis that the early church wholly misunderstood Jesus' hope, falsely attributing to him the idea of a physical return to earth for judgement and renewal. We suggest that 'Realised Eschatology', so ready to affirm the real inbreak of the divine into the world in the person and work of Jesus Christ, is strangely docetic with regard to the Parousia.

Thirdly (in chapter 5) we discuss Bultmann's demythologized eschatology. The questions, whether Jesus' entire concept of the future has always been wrongly evaluated, and whether it behoves us to re-interpret his expectation in the terms offered by Bultmann, are both answered in the negative.

At this point (chapter 6) we venture to suggest that the Parousia hope belongs to the very fabric and substance of the New Testament,

in all its parts, and to the very fabric and substance of Jesus' own thought and teaching in so far as it is possible to reconstruct this.

One of the most outstanding difficulties concerned with the New Testament Parousia expectation is the apparent insistence upon the *nearness* of the end. This difficulty, long recognised,¹ has often played a decisive role in interpreting and evaluating the New Testament hope as a whole. Involved in the three interpretations of eschatology already mentioned above are real attempts at elucidating this imminence—resolving it variously as a mistaken, but essential ingredient in Jesus' thought; as the early church's error; or as the expression in temporal terms of a supra-temporal impingement of the eternal order on man. Besides these interpretations, a number of scholars are prepared to see the imminence simply as a peripheral mistake on Jesus' part. But our examination of this view (in chapter 7) seeks to show that problems and questions, more radical than is usually supposed, arise in this case. Some relate the imminence to events *other than* the Parousia—to the Resurrection, the fall of Jerusalem, Pentecost, or the church's mission; or to two or more of these events taken together. But these interpretations we find unconvincing.

In chapters 8 and 9 we re-examine this element of imminence, seeking to determine whether the early church (in the first instance) believed that the Parousia would definitely occur within a specified time, or whether its imminent expectation was *undelimited* and altogether differently orientated. Following this, in chapters 10 and 11 we press the same questions further, asking whether Jesus himself expected the Parousia to occur within a set period of time, or whether his hope was differently orientated.

In the light of this discussion we draw (in chapter 12) a number of conclusions having a bearing upon the life of the church in the present. It is thereby hoped to show how directly relevant the Parousia hope is for the life of the church. The Parousia hope was, we believe, one of the driving forces behind the early church's life and obedience and behind its missionary zeal.² Perhaps by probing these questions and problems again, some light may be shed

¹ J. Kiss, 'Zur eschatologischen Beurteilung der Theologie des Apostels Paulus', in *Z.s.T.* XIV 1938, pp. 379ff., emphasises this.

² Cf. Cullmann, 'Eschatologie und Mission im N.T.', in *Evang. Missionsmagazin*, 1941, pp. 98-108; and below, chapter 4, p. 60.

on the motive which should drive the church to the same primary tasks¹ with urgency and responsibility, and yet with freedom and confidence.

¹ The absolute centrality of mission in the church's life and work is often acknowledged—cf. e.g. H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World*, pp. 24-30. M. Warren, *The Triumph of God*, pp. 103-4. *The Lambeth Conference Report*, 1958, pp. 2, 75. *Evanston Speaks* pp. 32-33—but usually, in practice, remains peripheral.