

The Church at the End of the Gospel Age

*“Do all things
without
murmurings and
disputings: That ye
may be blameless
and harmless, the
sons of God,
without rebuke, in
the midst of a
crooked and
perverse nation,
among whom ye
shine as lights in
the world.”*

—Philippians 2:14,15

A HISTORIAN WROTE CONCERNING the days of the French Revolution that it was “the worst of times and the best of times.” The same might truthfully be said about the era through which the world is presently passing. It is indeed the ‘worst of times,’ for it is the period foretold by Jesus and the prophets wherein there would be “distress of nations, with perplexity,” when evil men and seducers shall “wax worse and worse,” and when there would be a “time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation.”—Luke 21:25; II Tim. 3:13; Dan. 12:1

Who can doubt that we have reached such a time? In addition to international terrorism and

violence, there are internal upheavals within nations, with graft and crime rampant everywhere. No one dares hope that the measure of tranquility which may be enjoyed in some part of the world today will not be disrupted tomorrow, so there is a constant state of apprehension and fear from which millions are attempting to escape through avenues of questionable, and sometimes sordid, pleasures. Such are the death throes of this “present evil world” as it succumbs to the weight of its own sin and selfishness.—Gal. 1:4

On the other hand, it can be said that we are living in the ‘best of times,’ for these are the days immediately preceding the establishment of the kingdom of Christ. Only those who are blessed with the vision of present Truth can understand and appreciate this viewpoint. Apart from the Truth, the world situation today seems desperate indeed, for it denotes a failure of churchianity to accomplish its designed purpose of influencing the nations of earth to live at peace with one another.

To the many in the world who make no profession of belief in Christianity, the outlook is equally dark and threatening. There is a measure of wishful thinking on the part of some, but no genuine hope anywhere in the world, and apart from the Truth of God’s Word, nothing upon which to base such a hope. “All the foundations of the earth are out of course,” even as the prophet foretold, and human wisdom is unable to find an answer—“They walk on in darkness.”—Ps. 82:5

LIGHTS IN THE WORLD

The thought uppermost in the hearts of those who know the Truth is one of thanksgiving to God for opening the eyes of their understanding to know and appreciate his glorious plan of salvation. This spirit of thankfulness is bound to overflow, not only in direct praise to God for his abounding grace, but in showing forth his praise to as many others as possible. Those into whose hearts the LORD has shined with the Gospel, and who in turn are reflecting the light of Truth in order that those around them might see it, are lights in the dark world of today, and should not hide their light of Truth under a “bushel.”—Matt. 5:14-16

There should be no question in the minds of Truth-enlightened Christians as to the nature of the message which should be proclaimed at the present time—or, in fact, at any time—for now, as ever, it should be nothing short of the Gospel of the kingdom. The incentive for preaching this Gospel should be no other than love for God and a desire to bless those who may have ears to hear, and hearts to respond to the message. It is highly important, to keep these viewpoints in mind, else there may be danger that in our zeal we may place ourselves in the unfortunate position of being energetic, yet unapproved, ambassadors.

Jesus was persecuted, and we want to be like Jesus. The apostles and others in the Early Church were also persecuted, and we want to follow them as they followed Christ. We know that it is only “through much tribulation” that we may hope to enter the kingdom; that it is only if “we suffer with him” that we may also reign with him.—Acts 14:22; Rom. 8:17

These thoughts are scriptural, and should weigh heavily in our Christian thinking, but they should not be allowed to outweigh other important truths pertaining to the proper attitude of the Christian in this world of darkness. Persecution is not alone an evidence of being on the LORD's side. It would be comparatively easy to stir up the wrath of the world against ourselves, if that were the only consideration. But then the question would be whether or not we were suffering for righteousness' sake, or for our own misguided efforts.

The LORD's people should always walk in the true path of righteousness. It is something that we will do well to remember. At present, the Gospel of the kingdom is being heralded by radio, television, and Internet, yet seemingly there is not a great deal of outward opposition to it. There is indifference, but little active persecution. Because of this we might conclude that our message is not useful.

What did Jesus mean when he said that his church was the "light of the world"? (Matt. 5:14) What did Paul mean when he said that we 'shine as lights in the world'? Do any of the scriptures which bear on the Christian's commission as an ambassador for Christ suggest he is to be a crusader in the world? There is much in the world that is wrong, and against which we could find fault. But is it in this manner that we are to shine as lights in the world? If so, how shall we decide which particular wrongs in the world we are to address? Shall we crusade against the liquor or drug traffic?

The overtones of war and terrorism are now being thundered around the world. The masses do not want war, but the international situation is

such that the youth are being sucked into a terrible abyss of slaughter. Here is something that every sincere Christian could easily be in open rebellion against, but is this what the LORD wants?

OUR EXEMPLAR

What would Jesus do? This is a question that each one of us should seriously ask ourselves as we consider the nature of the message that we are commissioned to proclaim in the violent world of today. One of the first messages Jesus gave when he began his ministry was delivered in a synagogue in Nazareth. It was based on Isaiah 61:1-3. This is a prophecy concerning Jesus' anointing by the Holy Spirit—his commission for service. It is also our commission for service; for as members of his mystical body we receive of the same anointing that came upon him.

Just what is included in this Divine authorization? "The LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; . . . to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, . . . the opening of the prison to them that are bound; . . . To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn;" to give those who mourn in Zion "beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."

When Jesus said to his audience in Nazareth that this scripture was fulfilled in their ears, he did not quote all of it, stopping just before it mentions the 'day of vengeance.' There was good reason for this, for that part of the commission, indeed all the remainder of it, has its particular application in

this end of the Gospel Age rather than at the beginning of the age when Jesus conducted his personal ministry. The day of vengeance is one of the scriptural expressions that indicate the significance of the great time of trouble with which this Gospel Age comes to an end.

In a study of this entire commission, several points come clearly to light. One is that it calls for the proclamation of the whole Gospel. To specialize on some particular segment of the Truth would not be in keeping with this Divine commission. It calls for the proclamation of the great hope of restoration, as well as the “high calling” of this age—the ‘acceptable year of the Lord.’ (Phil. 3:14) These two great fundamentals of the Gospel cannot be presented properly and effectively apart from an explanation of man’s fall, his redemption through Christ, and his need for repentance and surrender to the LORD. This has been the work of the church throughout the age, and every consecrated follower of the Master is still bound by the same Divine commission. Nothing should be taken away from this Divine commission

“THE DAY OF VENGEANCE”

Now that we are at the end of the Gospel Age there is added the responsibility of proclaiming the ‘day of vengeance.’ This is not in reality an additional message, but more particularly an up-to-date application of the same glorious Gospel of the kingdom, in that it involves an explanation of present world conditions in the light of prophecy, and emphasizes the fact that the kingdom of Christ is man’s only hope of survival. It is God’s day of

vengeance that is upon the nations, and this means that we are in the time of Christ's Second Presence.

To declare these truths relating to the day of vengeance does not imply pronouncing vengeance, nor does it call for a campaign of smiting condemnation against the evils of the crumbling world. Generally speaking, the people already know how wrong the world is, but they do not know the basic causes of the world's insanity, nor do they have any conception at all of the Divine remedy—the kingdom of Christ. Only in the great plan of God is this information available, and it is our privilege to proclaim the glorious truths of the Divine plan.

Our preaching of the day of vengeance consists in explaining as clearly as possible the meaning of present world chaos, that the judgments of God are upon the nations, and that soon Christ's kingdom will be established to bless and restore the people to health and life. Properly presented, the truth concerning the day of vengeance should be one of great comfort. It will 'comfort all that mourn,' and surely the world is filled with mourning ones today.

In Isaiah 35:4, the responsibility of the saints during this time of trouble is again mentioned. The text reads: "Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompence; he will come and save you." Jesus said that at this time the hearts of the people would fail them for fear as they looked ahead to the things coming upon the earth (Luke 21:26), but it is our privilege to say to as many of these as we can, "Fear not." We can say this by explaining that while the trouble now upon the earth is a manifestation of God's

vengeance, it is but preparatory to the blessings of Christ's kingdom, the salvation of all the willing and obedient from sin and death.

MOURNERS IN ZION

Isaiah 61:3 makes special mention of those 'who mourn in Zion.' These seem to be in addition to the 'all that mourn' mentioned in verse two. Those who mourn in Zion are those who, in one way or another, are associated with the professed people of God, and who are distressed over conditions with which they are surrounded, both in the world and in the church.

The same glorious message of present Truth that comforts sorrowing ones in the world in proportion to their faith to believe it, is also a satisfying portion to these who mourn in Zion. Indeed, it is especially so, for the reason that it provides an explanation for the confusing and disappointing situations in which they find themselves as a result of the church systems' failure to convert the world. It is not that a special message needs to be directed to these, for the Truth of the Divine plan, the Gospel of the kingdom, suffices to accomplish this desired end, even as the same message accomplishes all the other objectives of the Divine commission.

The term Zion is also sometimes used in the prophecies concerning God's typical chosen people, those who are Israelites after the flesh. The kingdom message also reaches and comforts any among these who have ears to hear.

We are not to suppose, though, that the Lord's commission implies that all who hear the message will be comforted, nor that every individual mourning

one in the world will even be reached by the efforts of the saints—although we should do all we can toward this end. The thought is, rather, that there are no restrictions on the scope of the commission. The whole world is the field of service, and in this world of darkness we are to let our light shine as brightly and as effectively as possible.

FOR A WITNESS

Jesus said that “this gospel of the kingdom” would be preached in all the world for a “witness.” (Matt. 24:14) It is not to be expected that more than this will be accomplished. That feature of the Gospel pertaining to the ‘high calling’ of this age is still reaching one here and there, and every effort should be made to nurture these in the Truth, and encourage them to run zealously for the prize of the High Calling. Indeed, no part of the Truth should be held back from those who show a desire to learn the way of the Lord more perfectly. Those who progress in knowledge should be instructed in all the truths of God’s Word, including its prophecies. As for the people in general we will find that our efforts have resulted largely in a witness, rather than in bringing large numbers into the Truth.

This will be true with respect to both Jews and Gentiles. The prophecies clearly indicate that the Jews would return to the promised land in unbelief, and that they would remain in unbelief until in the final phase of the great trouble they should be attacked by aggressor nations from the north, and the Lord would intervene to save them. In confirmation of this Paul declares that “blindness in part” came upon Israel “until the fulness of the

Gentiles be come in.” (Rom. 11:25) The reference here is to the grafting of Gentile branches into God’s olive tree of promise to take the places of the natural branches which were broken off because of unbelief.—vss. 17-24

This work is still going on. The ‘fulness’ of the Gentiles has not yet come in, and this explains why Israel is still in unbelief, and will remain so until their eyes are miraculously opened by the wonderful manner in which the Lord will protect and deliver them in that future hour of their greatest peril. An occasional one may accept the Truth, even as is true among the Gentiles, and has been true of both Jews and Gentiles throughout the age. But aside from this, let us not expect that our message will result in more than a ‘witness’ to those who hear.

“WITHOUT MURMURINGS”

In our text, the apostle admonishes us to ‘do all things without murmurings and disputings.’ How fitting is this counsel! The world in which we are to shine as lights is filled with strife and violence, and in such a world our witness will be effective in proportion to the wholesome influence of love and goodwill among ourselves as we proclaim the message. The LORD’s people should have but one objective in their labor of love, and there should be no reason for strife as together they lay down their lives showing forth the praises of their God.

It is thus, the apostle asserts, that we will be ‘blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke.’ If we continue faithfully to let our light shine in this dark and suffering world, sooner or

later we are sure to be rebuked by those who sit in darkness. But when it comes, it should be unmerited so far as any wrongdoing on our part is concerned. Our own conduct should be both harmless and blameless, hence without just cause for rebuke. Nor will we be rebuked by the Lord if we are faithful to the Truth and maintain the proper attitude of sympathy, understanding and love, as we minister the kingdom message to others.

Faithful followers of the Master have never found themselves at home in the world. Its spirit is contrary to their spirit, and it is a struggle to overcome the spirit of the world. This is especially true today. We are surrounded by turmoil and chaos, by violence and hatred, but let us rise above these in our association with one another and in our attitude toward those to whom we proclaim the message. Paul speaks of the 'perverse nation' of his day, and now we have the privilege of shining as lights in a perverse world. It is a world that is falling apart under the weight of its perverseness. We cannot do anything to hinder this, nor would we want to, but we can tell the people that a new world order is near.

The Prophet Isaiah, in symbolic language, describes this new world order of Christ's future kingdom of righteousness. "Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come to mind." (Isa. 65:17) Peter confirms this wonderful feature of that kingdom which describes the new social order administered by Christ. "We, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness."—II Pet. 3:13

We do not know how much longer we will have the privilege of shining as lights in the world; so let us make faithful use of every opportunity we have, rejoicing in the realization that if faithful in doing the LORD's will now, we will be united with Christ beyond the veil, and together with him, "shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their [our] Fa-ther." (Matt. 13:43) Then it will not be a case of lights shining in the darkness, for the darkness will be dispelled by the glory of the Sun of Righ-teousness, and the knowledge of the LORD shall fill the whole earth "as the waters cover the sea."—Isa. 11:9

