

PRELIMINARY REMARKS.

The doctrine which I am about to examine in the light of Scripture is generally known as the Secret Rapture. As I have met one or two persons who deny that secrecy is an essential part of the doctrine, I have left this point unnoticed. This secret-rapture view is fast gaining ground. It appears to have originated amongst Dissenters, but it is now warmly advocated by many members of the Church of England.¹ There is something about this theory, apart from its promise of deliverance from the persecution under antichrist, which renders it very fascinating. My own mind was under its spell for about five years. It was not without a struggle that I was induced to admit the possibility of it being false and to set myself to examine its alleged scriptural foundations. Having first prayed to God to take away my strong bias for the doctrine if it were untrue, I tested, to the best of my ability, by Scripture, all the arguments which I have heard advanced in its support. The result I give in this paper. I found to my surprise that the arguments for it were of the most unsatisfactory character; in fact, that almost any doctrine, no matter how erroneous, might be advocated on the same kind of hypothetical grounds. I have felt for some time a growing burden of regret that this ingenious figment of the human fancy should have been foisted upon God's people as if a most valuable truth. The readiness with which this theory is being received is a proof of how many are studying the Bible by the light of man's teaching instead of "taking heed what they hear" and bringing everything to the touchstone of Scripture.

Apart from the test of the Word, which is the only final one, there are certain reasons why this doctrine should be viewed with suspicion, and only received after being submitted to the most careful scrutiny. It appears to be little more than sixty years old; and it seems highly improbable that, if scriptural, it could have escaped the scrutiny of the many devoted Bible-students whose writings have been preserved to us from the past. More especially in the writings of the early Christian fathers would we expect to find some notice of this doctrine, if it had been taught by the apostles; but those who have read their works declare that they betray no knowledge of a theory that the Church would escape the tribulation under antichrist, or that there would be any "coming" except that spoken of in Matthew xxiv. as occurring in manifest glory "after the tribulation." This is all the more significant, because these writers bestowed much attention upon the subject of the antichrist and the great tribulation. Augustine, referring to Daniel vii., wrote: "But he who reads this passage even half-asleep cannot fail to see that the kingdom of antichrist shall fiercely, though for a short time, assail the Church." (*De Civitate Dei.*)

Another reason why this theory should excite suspicion is, that it has been the means of originating a very reprehensible method of dealing with the word of God. I refer to the practice of Judaizing Scripture. This means the putting aside of certain parts of the New Testament as not applying to us, but to Jewish believers who are supposed to come into existence after the alleged rapture of the Church before the tribulation. This Judaizing practice seems to have sprung up side by side with the doctrine of the Pre-tribulation Rapture, and was no doubt produced by it. By its aid alone can the Scriptures be adjusted so as to meet the requirements of this doctrine. If it is permissible for me to put out of court as Jewish any scripture that I adjudge to be so, I can easily bring the Scriptures into accord with any hypothesis I choose to advance, because I shall have silenced all obnoxious passages. This Judaizing method of evading unwelcome scriptures is very like that resorted to by Jehoiachim when Jeremiah's prophecy was

¹ Some recent works which advocate this view are: Pember's *Earth's Earliest Ages; The Expected Rapture of the Church*, by Warrant Houghton; and a work on *Prophecy* by W. Haslam, M.A., the well-known evangelist.

brought to him. (Jer. xxxvi. 23.) What he did with his penknife they do by means of this practice, and for the same reason, because the words of God are not in accord with their plan.

This method has been aptly described as making use of the "Jewish waste-paper-basket." Though devised to make room for a prophetic theory, it has been applied to parts of the Word that are not prophetic. Even the heart-searching words of Christ in the so-called sermon on the mount are thus got rid of. To show that I am not exaggerating, I will relate an incident which happened to me three years ago, and which fully opened my eyes to the dangers of this Judaizing system.

I met an acquaintance in London, who invited me to a Bible-reading. The subject was 2 Timothy i. I was asked, "Did I not understand that 2 Timothy was Jewish? I confessed my ignorance; and was then asked, "Did I not know that we were to 'rightly divide the Word of truth?'" I found to my surprise that this little *coterie* were of one mind on this subject, and that they thought that no scriptures directly applied to the Church except Ephesians and Colossians. They read other scriptures because they were, they allowed, in a certain sense "profitable!" To anyone whose mind is not fully led captive by the pre-tribulation theory, such a method of dealing with the word of God seems most daring and indefensible. But I am persuaded that the practice is not adopted through any want of reverence. Having embraced as a firmly established truth this view regarding the second coming, its supporters are compelled, the more closely they study Scripture, more and more to have recourse to this Judaizing system. The verse 2 Timothy ii. 15 cannot be taken as sanctioning any practice of this kind. Conybeare and Howson, in their *Epistles and Life of St. Paul*, comment on the verse. They say that the word "rightly dividing" is a metaphor taken from the carpenter's trade, and they suggest as its meaning, "handling without distortion." We would not approve of a carpenter who, instead of taking care that his handiwork was done according to the plan given him, altered the plan to make it correspond with his ideas or with his faulty performance.

The idea too is improbable, that an infinitely wise God should have intrusted to such fallible creatures as we are the task of apportioning the New Testament Scriptures between Christians and Jews. I do not, of course, refer to those passages which obviously speak of Israel. As a matter of fact, the adherents of this theory differ among themselves as to the right way to apply it. Some take certain passages of a book as Jewish and retain the rest as meant for Christians; whilst others, with more consistency, excise the whole book. No part of the New Testament seems safe from their pruning-knife. The Apocalypse even, guarded as it is by the promise of blessing to the reader, as well as by the solemn warning at its close to anyone who adds to or takes from its contents, has not escaped. The whole book has, by one writer at least, been Judaized, and all this school are in the habit of dealing thus with the portion between the third and twentieth chapters. The first three gospels, the Acts, and all the epistles save the Pauline, have frequently been thus assailed. As Paul is said to be the revealer of the secret rapture, his writings have been spared by most, but not by all, as the incident related shows. The epistle to the Hebrews seems the one most obnoxious, and it has been recently asserted that it is for the millennium. This is a singular notion; for the coming of Christ is frequently mentioned throughout this epistle as still in the future, and is held up as an incentive for faithfulness to Christ.

Much more might be said, but this is sufficient to justify me in entirely discarding the Judaizing system in this enquiry.

As regards the allegorical mode of interpreting prophecy, many proofs can be given that it has no warrant from God. All the prophecies that the Bible itself declares to have been fulfilled have had a most rigidly *literal* fulfilment. Now these prophecies are interwoven in the same web of Scripture with those that were not fulfilled in Scripture times. What right have we then to assume that the one class will be fulfilled on an entirely different principle from the other? Our Lord too has by His example taught us to interpret prophecy literally. He often referred to the prophecies concerning His sufferings, and always took them in the literal way. He upbraided His disciples after His resurrection for being so slow of heart to believe *all* that the prophets had spoken. The departing from the literal mode of understanding the language of inspiration has been the source of immeasurable evil to the cause of the truth. It was by means of the allegorizing of Scripture that the Church drifted into the darkness of Popery, so that even the pre-millennial advent, that bright hope of the Church, became lost to view. In proof of this I shall quote from two well-known Church historians. The first is Mosheim, who is an unbiassed witness, being himself an allegorist. Writing of Origen, who, in the third century, first brought into vogue this allegorical system of interpretation, he says:

"The Christian doctors, who had applied themselves to the study of letters and philosophy, soon abandoned the frequented paths, and struck out into the devious wilds of fancy. Origen was at the head of this speculative tribe." And again: "He maintained that the Holy Scriptures were to be interpreted in the same allegorical manner that the Platonists explained the history of their gods. . . . In this devious path he displays the most ingenious strokes of fancy, though always at the expense of Truth, whose divine simplicity is scarcely discernible through the cobweb veil of allegory. Long before his day an opinion had prevailed that Christ was to come and reign a thousand years among men before the entire and final dissolution of the world. This opinion had hitherto met with no opposition; but in this century its credit began to decline, principally through the influence and authority of Origen, who opposed it with the greatest warmth, because it was incompatible with some of his favourite sentiments." Milner writes: "No man, not altogether unsound and hypocritical, ever injured the Church of Christ as Origen did. From the fanciful mode of allegory introduced by him, and uncontrolled by scriptural rule and order, arose a vitiated method of commenting on the sacred pages. . . . A thick mist for ages pervaded the Christian world, supported and strengthened by his absurd allegorical manner of interpretation. The learned alone were considered as guides implicitly to be trusted; and the vulgar, when the literal sense was hissed off the stage, had nothing to do but to follow their authority wherever it might conduct them."

Many more reasons might be added for the renunciation of this method of handling the word of God, but I do not need to enlarge on the subject. The word revelation means an unveiling--the removal of that which obscures an object from view. It is contrasted with the idea of secrecy in the Bible. "Secret things belong unto the Lord our God, the things which He has revealed unto us and our children." "There is nothing covered that shall not be revealed." In prophecy God reveals His thoughts and purposes to His people, and does not enwrap His meaning in obscurity after the manner of the heathen oracles. Their intentional ambiguity was for the purpose of keeping up their credit. Whatever happened, they could affirm it was what had been signified by the equivocal utterance that had been given. In Isaiah xli. God challenges His creatures "to declare the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that ye are gods." In the next chapter he announces that it belongs to the Lord to do this. "New things do I declare, before they spring forth do I declare them unto you." There would be no force in this announcement if God spoke His predictions in so ambiguous a manner as to require the aid of imagination to trace any resemblance between the prediction and its alleged fulfilment. In the writings of this school no

unanimity is to be found. The cause of this is evident. If the language of Scripture is not taken in its obvious and natural sense, who is to determine what degree of looseness of interpretation is permissible? From these and many other considerations, I conclude that the allegorical mode of interpreting prophecy has been proved to be an evil thing, on the principle that a tree is known by its fruits. The same may be said of the inferential method of the Secret Rapture school.

Edmund Shackleton, *Will the Church Escape the Great Tribulation?* 3rd ed. (Aylesbury: Hunt, Barnard & Co., n.d.)