

The obedience of the church as a prelude to the *Parousia*: Ecclesial and temporal factors in New Testament eschatology¹

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ABSTRACT

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The thesis investigates the possibility, nature and implications of a pre-parousial ecclesiastical maturity within the context of New Testament eschatology. It is a biblical presentation of the hope for the completion of the church's internal and external mission prior to the Parousia, arguing that the obedience of the church in its accomplishment of its mission both expedites and precipitates the terminal apocalyptic events. It argues that the New Testament motif of the expectation of a latter-day glory of the church is an epochal event that is a primary factor in understanding the timing of the apocalyptic events of the terminal generation.

INTRODUCTION

The volcanic period of the French Revolution, with its violent uprooting of both political and social institutions, was the occasion for acute religious apocalyptic fever. This tectonic event was directly responsible for the revival of prophetic concern and provided the necessary fillip for an ardent millenarian movement (see Sandeen 1978:3-41 and Fromm 1946). One such movement was the Brethren ecclesial modality, for which John Nelson Darby [1800-1882] provided the primary ideological and ecclesiastical momentum. Darby's eschatology is undoubtedly the tap-root of twentieth century Dispensationalism, which in turn has influenced the eschatological expectations of large segments of Christendom (see Weber 1979; Bass 1960; Williams 1989).

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The matrix for Darby's ecclesio-eschatological ideology was found in the ferment of the Revolution, being a part of the British millennial revival of that time. During this period premillennialism came to prominence whilst postmillennial adherents suffered under the contemporary disenchantment. Darby however is responsible for publicising and systematising the ideas associated with the secret rapture of the church and of a parenthesis in prophetic fulfillment (Bass 1960:47). These novel doctrines may have originated with Edward Erving (so Rennie 1992:197), yet Darby was clearly the mind and force behind these ideas.

Unfortunately, this was a period of ecclesial dissolution. Attempts to Christianize society had failed, the church itself was divided – for many, nothing could rectify the situation save the personal presence of Jesus Christ. Darby synthesized this prevalent ecclesial pessimism and his own ecclesial idealism with the historical and apocalyptic events of the 1800's and the NT apocalyptic. The result of his synthesis could be pictured as a building (Christendom) situated precariously on a foundation built upon sand. With the storm rains threatening the whole house, the only hope for the faithful inside was evacuation. No rebuilding or reform within the house could remedy the situation. The faithful were to meet simply in faith and fellowship under the name of Jesus, anxiously anticipating the Lord's secret return to evacuate them from the demise of both the world and the church.

That the church is in ruins was therefore axiomatic for Darby (Neatby 1902:87-95). Darby saw Revelation 2-3 as programmatic for church history, with the Laodicean church becoming a prophetic prediction of the apostasy of the visible church of Christ. With this 'prophetic key', Darby states: 'though the professing church still subsists in form, yet it is utterly rejected, and Christ declares unconditionally that he will spew it out of his mouth' (Darby 1962:365). This interpretation of the Laodicean church was the watershed in Darby's interpretation of the book of Revelation. Before the rapture of the church in Revelation 4, 'God has done with the church as a testimony... The church has failed to put its Amen to the promises of God' (1962:368). Now the world crisis begins and Israel completes where the church failed (see Bass 1960:102). Darby had no problem with this extreme ecclesial pessimism, for to him the church's fundamental nature was primarily heavenly and spiritual (a nature clearly quite consistent with a secret and spiritual rapture and

coming *for* the saints). Ultimately, Darby spawned the idea that the church dispensation will end in the plenary apostasy of this historical body, that salvation-history has to do with Israel alone, and that the pre-tribulation rapture is the next great ecclesial expectation. To him, the future of this age is a church-less future. The church has no historical destiny. He is therefore the arch representative of that eccentric thinking that sees the evacuation of the church as the precipitating factor in initiating the final events of God's eschatological program.

This article will show to the contrary that the church's presence in the world (not its absence) and its glorious maturity is the crucial factor in understanding the duration of the interadventual dispensation and the events of the terminal apocalyptic period. The plenary renewal of the church will forecast the glorious return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

1 NAHERWARTUNG, FERNERWARTUNG AND THE INTERADVENTUAL PERIOD

Since the epochal significance of Albert Schweitzer's allegations of a radical apocalyptic Jesus, NT scholarship has been confronted with the reality of the ardent and sustained proximity of the Parousia in the primitive church's expectation. Scholars are correct to note that from the words of Jesus to his Galilean disciples to be ready for his return (Lk 12:40), to his words to his church in Roman Asia Minor (Rv 22:12), we can fittingly see that the whole of the NT proclamation is enveloped within a sense of the temporal nearness of the consummation of the kingdom of God (Berkouwer 1981:83-84; Dunn 1977:325-334; Kreitzer 1979:896; Moore 1966:4-51, 160-164). Cranfield's words are axiomatic for any study of this NT phenomenon: there is 'an insistency on the nearness of the end, on the shortness of the time which remains, [that] is characteristic of the NT as a whole' (1982:510). For the primitive church Christ was returning soon. The Parousia was on the near side of the future horizon and not in the unobservable distance.

This climate of *Naherwartung* was engendered by certain factors. The presence of the kingdom in Jesus through his life, death, resurrection and Spirit-gift was crucial for their imminent expectation. If the first-fruits had arrived then the full harvest was not far off. The reality of the presence of the kingdom in Jesus is the 'first factor upon which the NT insistence upon the nearness of the

End is based. It is a specific understanding of the past phase of salvation-history as these have been brought to a head in Christ' (Moore 1966:168). Further, the apocalyptic scenario of the first century, with the social, political, economical and geographical circumstances also propelled a forward look. The reality of cognitive dissonance was experienced by the believers in the early church, being underscored by famines (Winter 1994), earthquakes (Godet, quoted in Biederwolf 1972:330) and the debacle of the Caligula crisis (Taylor 1996; 1999). Compounding this, a national renewal of Israel under the preaching of the gospel was being experienced in Jerusalem and its environs (Ac 2:41; 4:4; 9:31; 21:20). The booth of David was being restored (Ac 15:13-18). Lastly, the Christian mission was reaching all nations in eschatological realisation (Rm 10:18; 16:26; Col 1:6, 23). The linking of Acts 2:5 with Colossians 1:6 and 1:23 could witness to the accomplishment of the completion of the gospel coming to all nations in the first century Mediterranean in a representative fashion. During the first century a salvation-historical point was reached, and all nations 'representatively' present in the Mediterranean, heard the gospel (so Aus 1979:234). This preterist reality can also be seen as a proleptic event (O'Brien 1987:13), foreshadowing the quantitative correspondence in the terminal generation. This accomplishment (prior to 70 CE) must certainly have contributed to the apostolic church's *Naherwartung*.

Yet within this ardent *Naherwartung* there were certain factors that explained the non-fulfillment of the Parousia within the NT period and mitigated the intensity of the *Naherwartung*. Cullmann (1951; 1967) effectively showed that the 'already/not yet' tension was grounded in the ministry of Jesus, with the result that eschatology was incorporated into redemptive history. He refuted the thesis of some who believed that imminency was characteristic of authentic 'Christianity' and that salvation-history was not a part of authentic primitive Christianity (as Conzelmann 1960; see also Dunn 1977). Rather, what has arrived in Christ acted not merely as a counterpoise to the expectation of the 'not-yet' elements, but rather *integrated the 'delay elements' into the very nature of primitive Christianity*. In the scheme of salvation-history what had happened (those 'now' elements) has a primacy over what is still to happen (those 'not-yet' elements). Thus the *Fernerwartung* Scriptures point to the dynamic process of salvation-history, disallowing a tunnel vision reading of the *Naherwartung*.

The temporal relation between the two comings of Christ – and thus the duration of the interadventual period - is grounded in the interaction between the present mode and nature of the kingdom and its future mode and nature (Torrance 1953; Kümmel 1957:39). The primary grounds for the *Fernerwartung* can be found in the ‘apocalyptic structurization of the eschatological promise’ (Berkouwer 1981:453), such as is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Certain events were expected to transpire prior to the Parousia, in effect radically mitigating the *Naherwartung*. Also, the necessity of the extensive upbuilding of the church in mission through the outreach of the grace of God to all nations ‘held back’ the terminal events. The ‘now’ character of the kingdom, which creates space for human response, is to provide all men with a final chance. Lastly, the completion of God’s purpose in the ecclesia, the intensive upbuilding of the church, is a rather neglected ground of *Fernerwartung*. It is this element of *Fernerwartung* that is believed to be crucial for integrating NT temporal eschatology. Ecclesial factors are determinative for the duration of the *Zwischenzeit*. The *raison d’être* for the interadventual period is to be found, not in mission *per se* but in the maturity of the church. Mission is a means toward such an end.

Before we provide a quick tour through some of the Scriptures that anticipate such a ecclesial hope, we must ask ourselves: Does this ecclesial factor vitiate the above mentioned *Naherwartung*? Firstly, the *Naherwartung* is not the extreme ‘Schweitzerian’ imminence. To the primitive church, the end was not far off, maybe thought to be a matter of a few decades or so, *but certainly not centuries*. Thus there was ‘space’ for the temporal outworking of the present mode of the kingdom. Secondly, there was already in the apostolic period the reality of ecclesial maturity, though not of a comprehensive and collective nature. The empirical condition of churches varied, yet there were mature specimens, enough to show the credibility of the above assertion (the Philippian church). Thirdly, and crucially, at a certain time in Paul’s ministry, he believed that a local and strategic obedience of the Gentiles *had been secured* and a harvest had been gathered (Rm 15:17-19, 23; see Bowers 1987; Moo 1996:892-896; Garlington 1990:212; Peterson 2000:185; Köstenberger & O’Brien 2001:184). A certain missio-ecclesial status had been reached and this was significant for the *Naherwartung*.

2 ECCLESIAL FULFILMENT WITHIN HISTORY

Many postmillennialists have held to some form of hope for the glorification of the church prior to the Parousia. Although such a latter-day glory for the church is not limited to this temporal eschatological school, the *ecclesiologia gloriae* has received most of its theological articulation here (Glasson 1953:156-168; De Jong 1970; Davis 1986; Murray 1991; Gentry 1999). Particularly since the time of Joachim of Floris [1135-1202 CE], there has been a sustained hope of many that better times are ahead for the church (Glasson 1953:130-144; Kromminga 1945:125-137; Fromm 1950:683-701). Others such as Mattais of Janow [d. 1394] (Neander 1890:276-338) and Cotton Mather [1663-1727] (Lovelace 1979:64-72; Benz 1951:42-56) continued to provide explicit articulation of the *ecclesiologia gloriae*. De Jong affirms that ‘rooted deeply in the Reformation tradition were expectations of greater, more glorious days for the church on earth’, and that ‘undoubtedly, the spread of the Reformation itself enlivened such corporate, historical hopes’ (1970:7).

As the millennial views split into three temporal views, so the ecclesial ‘millennium’ can also be seen in three stereotyped ways: ‘postmillennial’ ecclesiology would emphasise the maturity of the church prior to the Parousia; ‘premillennial’ ecclesiology would see no fulfillment of the church mission and nature this side of heaven, and ‘amillennial’ ecclesiology would see the whole church-age as more or less carrying the maturity of the church, with no special pre-parousia glory but rather one final parousial glorification. The following section will argue for a ‘postmillennial’ ecclesiology. It is believed that such a pre-parousial glory and destiny of the church is not a speculation, but a theological hope revealed in the NT. The whole teleological and diachronic purpose of Christ for his church will reach a synchronic period of fulfillment. Although comparatively incomplete and partial compared with the parousial glory, this veritable historic attainment is nevertheless an epoch of strategic and significant fulfillment. What are some of the theological grounds for an optimistic ecclesial hope?

The parables of Jesus explicate the dynamic between the present and future aspects of the kingdom of God. They unfold for us the eschatological drama and reveal Christ’s fundamentally optimistic view of the future of what he came to inaugurate. It seems irresistible to avoid the conclusion of the central point of the

parables of the leaven and mustard seed: *the world will be 'Christianised' with the gospel*. Although Jesus anticipated intrusive elements into his movement (the parable of the tares), he was confident that his true followers would grow upward and outward, until they reached the zenith of their mission ('the harvest is the completion of the age', Mt 13:39). The *logia* of the building of his church (Mt 16:18), the coming of Elijah to restore all things (Mt 17:11-12) and the missionary mandate (Mt 24:14; 28:16-20), add cumulative cogency to imply the certainty of the consummation of the present work of the kingdom, and the corollary, the obedience of his followers in fulfilling this end.

The most instructive texts however, are found in the Pauline writings. Here we witness that Paul expected the faithful God to complete the work he had begun in the churches. In the image of the church presented to Christ as a spotless bride we have a controlling metaphor that provides direction and motivation for Paul's apostolic and pastoral labors (Batey 1971; Sampley 1971). This motif is clearly seen in 1 Corinthians 11:1-2, Colossians 1:28, 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13 and 5:23-24. Here present ecclesial holiness among the believers was considered the *precondition for a pure presentation at the Eschaton*. In Paul's introductory thanksgivings we have the accenting of this desired ecclesial maturity and Paul's remarkable confidence of the certainty of the completion of God's purpose with the churches (Phlp 1:3-11; 1 Cor 1:4-9). Further, it is in Ephesians 4:1-16 that we have the crowning text that unpacks Paul's expected ecclesial perfection and hope, arguably programmatic for Paul's evangelistic and pastoral ministry. In these apical ecclesial verses, the maturity of the church is explicitly mentioned as the goal of all activity and service in the church. It points to the 'adult age of the church' (Meyer 1879:227), when the extensive and intensive upbuilding of the body of Christ will have reached its *terminus ad quem* (see Ridderbos 1997:432-438).

Is the church expected to attain to this Ephesians 4:13 maturity in her historical pilgrimage or is it only realisable at the Parousia? Those who believe the former (see the list in Graham 1997:323) point to the stubborn fact that 'this passage makes more sense if understood as an attainable, expected goal for Christians in the present. Otherwise the focus on Christian maturity in v 14-16 makes no sense. Paul's concern is that his readers will not be blown about like babes now, not after the Parousia' (Snodgrass 1996:205-206;

also Du Plessis 1959:193). If the maturity was only attainable post-parousia, then it is not understandable why Paul defined the maturity as the ability to stand amidst false teaching. In the light of the other Pauline texts, the ecclesial hope found there in Ephesians is seen as the crystallisation of his hope and not a novel or extra-Pauline sentiment. If Paul did realistically expect such an event to transpire, such an ecclesial state would have profound affect upon the world and for the whole *raison d'etre* of the interadventual age, suggesting its association with the terminal generation and the Parousia.

The last Pauline aspect to receive our attention is that of Paul's understanding of salvation-history. The studies of Munck (1959) Aus (1979) and Vena (1999) deserve mention. These scholars provided a helpful 'preterist' link between Romans 15:17-19 and Romans 11:25-26. They showed how Paul's local missionary work played a crucial part in the larger salvation-historical purposes of God, and how he saw himself expediting the imminent End through his Gentile mission. They have taken seriously the influence of *Naherwartung* on Paul's mission, and eschatologised the missionary activity of Paul (see also Barrett 1988 and Jeremias 1967). They have helped us move away from the traditional numerical understanding of 'the fullness of the Gentiles' (Rm 11:25) to one of 'corporate representation' and 'representative universalism'. Paul thus expected a *full Gentile harvest* to come in prior to the End – a hope that fueled his own mission. He anticipated a period in history when the whole Gentile mission will reach a satisfactory state of completion, of which his own 'local' missionary endeavors were inaugurative. This state of completion will represent the whole Gentile world through both its broad numerical cross-section and its quality of 'the obedience faith' (Garlington 1990). Paul's hope was that a *sufficient representative number and quality of Gentiles from all nations would be reached and trigger the restoration of Israel*. Thus a glorious end-time event was expected to transpire and inaugurate the end of history. Something glorious was expected to occur within the church of Jesus Christ – something glorious enough to make Israel jealous.

Lastly, if one understands the book of Revelation through a modified futurism (Ladd 1983; Mounce 1998; Aune 1997; Bauckham 1993), the book presents us with the ultimate picture of a glorious church prior to the Parousia. In the final period, the bride will successfully endure as she follows the Lamb and resists the

allurements of the global world-system. In this way she adorns herself with her eschatological glory and prepares herself for the marriage supper of the Lamb. A futurist-ecclesial interpretation of the images of the 144000, the two witnesses, the dragon and the church, the virgins and the prepared bride unite to give cogent testimony to the final obedience of the triumph of the church in history. Thus the theme of ecclesial preparation is consummated in this book, the climax of prophecy (Bauckham 1993). This theme in the book reaches climax in 19:7-9, where the time of the eschatological marriage is synchronised with the complete preparation of the bride. Christ the Groom comes for a bride who is finally ready to meet him.

3 ECCLESIAL FULFILLMENT AND HISTORICAL CONSEQUENCES

Given the positive ecclesial hope, it now remains to be shown that *the church witness to the present mode of the kingdom in mission and obedience precipitates and determines the nature and the timing of the final apocalyptic period*. If the obedience of the church is to be a prelude to the Parousia, then we can go a step beyond the hope of postmillennial ecclesiology and say that the church precipitates the apocalyptic horizon. It is thus a short step away from concluding that the obedience of the church plays a crucial role in determining the duration of the interadventual period. The obedience of the church as a witness is thus organically linked to the wider conception of salvation-history and necessarily correlated to the apocalyptic judgment of Christ. The traditional apocalyptic events in the NT are mainly the terminal tribulation (Rv 6:17-20:3), the rebellion and the apostasy (2 Th 2:2), the antichrist (2 Th 3:2-12) and the Parousia can be organically related to the obedience and purity of the church.

Toward the end, the demonic countermovement will itself reach a peak in certain crystallised events (Berkhof 1966:115). The future terminal tribulation can be seen as an ungodly reflex of the world upon the church due to her obedience to the great commission in being a witness to the whole world. The rebellion and apostasy can be seen as a religious defection consequent upon the complete obedience of the church. The true manifestation of the identity of the church in history will have a corollary historical manifestation: the true revelation of all that is associated with her who are not truly of her (1 Jn 2:19). The wheat and the tares will ripen together (Mt

13:30). The rise of the antichrist represents the collective opposition of humanity that has been extruded by the rejection of the gospel of the kingdom of God. If the church is responsible for witnessing to all nations - which in turn confronts men with a decision - and if the rise of Antichrist is dependent upon peculiar spiritual and moral world conditions, *then the church mission is organically related to the time and occurrence of Antichrist's rise*. His parousia described in 2 Thessalonians is correlated with the consummation of evil and the rejection of the truth by men (so Charles 1913:439). He comes in the context of an antecedent 'postmillennial' spread and success of the gospel, being in direct opposition to its truth and reality. In postmillennial style, Berkhof refers to this future figure as the 'organic end-product of a becoming Christian de-Christianised world' (1966:115). So, as the church faithfully witnesses to the midpoint revelation, we believe that she can speed up the parousia of the pseudo-christ, who must appear before the Parousia of the true Christ.

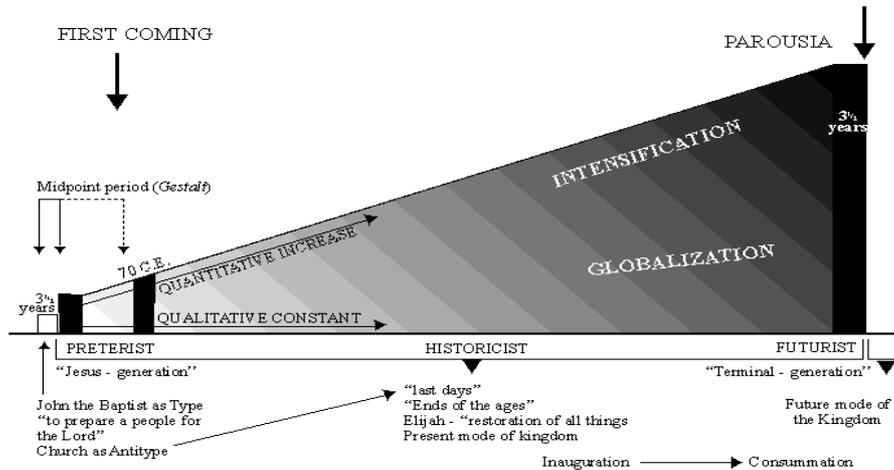
Finally we note that not only does such a period depend upon the obedience of the church, this period itself acts positively on the church, establishing her obedience and qualifying her for the coming kingdom (as 1 Pt 5:10). It acts extrusively and spawns the necessary condition for the Parousial wedding.

4 A SYNOPTIC MODEL FORM INTEGRATING THE TEMPORAL FACTORS OF NEW TESTAMENT ESCHATOLOGY

It has been possible to pull together all the crucial aspects in the theological interpretation of the interadventual period. The following diagram is offered as a guide for understanding these dynamics:

(Before we begin with our exegesis of this diagram, it needs to be noted that this temporal presentation of the *Zwischenzeit* is a theological perspective and is not to be superimposed on our human temporal reckoning of the period, i.e., from 1 CE onwards. It is a theological interpretation of the temporal duration).

A synoptic model for integrating the temporal factors of New Testament eschatology



We notice that the entire period embraces the ‘last days’ period, the Old Testament term for that period prior to the final public day of the Lord (Jl 2:28-32). This is also the so-called ‘temporary Messianic kingdom’ spoken of in Jewish intertestamental apocalyptic (see Russell 1964:291). This entire epoch is the ‘ends of’ and the ‘consummation of the ages’ (1 Cor 10:11; Heb 9:26), the Elijah-type ‘restoration of all things’ (Ml 4:5-6; Mt 17:11; Ac 3:21), realities all synonymous with the fulfillment found in the present mode of the kingdom. The typical ministry of John the Baptist as one who prepared a people for the first ‘parousia’ is continued antitypically in the ministry of the church during this entire epoch. In this sense we can affirm the affirmations of the amillennial school.

The epoch is theologically characterised by the primary midpoint revelation, seen in the life, death, resurrection and Spirit-gift of Christ. That sets the tone and character of the entire period (thus the arrows rooted there).

The first generation of the church (midpoint period with dotted lines up to 70 CE) was characterised by intense *Naherwartung*. It is itself almost a ‘contracted specimen’ of the dynamics of the entire interadventual period, with all of the theological elements characterising the entire period being found in essence here (thus the normative status of the NT canon). This matrix for the entire last days era is the reason why the preterist school of interpretation has immense value for understanding much of the NT.

We have stated above the conviction that the church is responsible for the extension of the midpoint revelation in history. She must qualitatively take '*this gospel*' into all the world. She must also quantitatively diffuse and extend and '*preach*' this gospel '*in all nations*' prior to the end, globalising the midpoint period. The historicist school is partially correct to expect partial historical manifestations of biblical predictions throughout the entire period, for *the entire period is eschatological*. Finally, the futurists are correct in expecting a plenary and definitive manifestation of the entire interadventual eschatological elements in the period prior to the Parousia: the terminal generation. A time will come when the present kingdom has worked its way throughout the whole world, extruding and characterising nations and people. Once this has been attained, the final period (inclusive of the last brief period of 'three and a half years') will be inaugurated and terminal apocalyptic conditions will be experienced. Lastly, we believe that there is an *intensification* in movement. This is expressed by Jesus in his parables of organic growth of the kingdom from incipient character to apical outgrowth (wheat, seed, leaven, mustard seed). In this sense the postmillennialist school is correct.

The three hermeneutical schools of New Testament temporal eschatology have always vied for the position of the key to unlock most of the apocalyptic portions of the New Testament. This diagram makes possible an integration of the three by way of understanding the temporal phases of the interadventual period.

5 CONCLUSION

In this article we have briefly attempted to demonstrate the determinative role of the ecclesial mission in understanding the nature and duration of the interadventual period, either expediting the Parousia or alternatively impeding it. With the Darbyite teaching as backdrop, we have alternatively shown that the church's glorious historical destiny is a major motif of the NT, one that provided the apostle Paul with inspiration for his Gentile mission. We have attempted to demonstrate that the church's mission is not undefined or uncertain, but has been predetermined through the witness of Christ in the midpoint period. The church is to take *that gospel* and bear witness to it in all the nations before the end. As she does this, the church is built up both extensively and intensively. Although the Scripture reveals that God's purposes through the church will be accomplished, the variable of human contingency is built into this

picture. God has sovereignly set the parameters of the interadventual period, yet the church has latitude within that framework to either obediently hasten or disobediently retard that inevitable Day. Taking both these aspects into account provides us with a balanced approach in understanding the duration of the interadventual period.

As the church is obedient to its mandate, so she will effect and fulfill what is predicted of her in the NT. These promises are not fulfilled automatically but are contingent upon the active faith and obedience of believers. As each part of the body grows up into the fullness of Christ, so the church will progressively attain to her ultimate destiny. Yet such an attainment is not grounded in any human factor but only in the power of Christ in his people, who is the only 'hope of glory', the one who will complete the good work he began.

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