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**BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY AND THE IDEA OF PROGRESS:  
Implications for the Teaching of History and Religion**

A Project

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## INTRODUCTION

Teaching history has many implications in the relationship of faith and learning; therefore, Christian educators must be concerned with a sound approach to history. One historical point of view deals with the idea of progress, a concept which in its full sense involves the belief that every day and in every way the world grows better and better. Consequently, this idea may be described as the belief in human perfectibility. How does a Christian teacher face that proposition? Particularly those Christians who believe in the soon coming of Christ, beholding the signs of the times already in fulfillment, may be confused with such evidences as the improvement of knowledge, science, technology, with its impact on health, low rate of mortality and the length of the rate of life. In other words, how can a Christian teacher relate eschatology and progress in history?

The present paper attempts to find out some meaningful and helpful answers to the above questions as it relates to Biblical eschatology and the historical idea of progress. This study is made under the conviction of the necessity to integrate faith with teaching endeavors in Christian education.

As it may be evident, some presuppositions underlie this essay; namely, it is written from the perspective of a Biblical understanding of history. That means, among other conclusions:

-The Bible supports a linear view of history in distinction from many religions and old to modern philosophies that hold a cyclical view of history. Some key points in history are: Creation, fall of man, and first and second coming of Christ.

-The meaning of history is rooted in God's plan to mankind in order to restore man to his original state, as being created *imago dei*.

-History is not proven to be true by rational analysis. Its acceptance is an achievement of faith, being an apprehension of truth beyond the limits of reason alone.

On the other hand, this essay is written from the perspective of a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible; that is to say, the Scripture is authoritative, as a supernatural Revelation, which is also applied to the study of history.

First of all, this paper gives an introduction to Biblical eschatology, its meaning, common interpretations, emphasis upon certain signs and their implications. Second, it considers the idea of progress, its meaning and historical development, its challenges, and its decline as a theory. Finally, the work deals with the reality of both eschatological signs and progress, pointing out the outstanding facts in each one of them.

### Biblical Eschatology

A Definition. Eschatology has been defined briefly as "the doctrine of the last things." The term itself first came to be used extensively in the 19th century. In the apocalyptic sense it has been understood as "unveiling the hidden events." In contemporary theology stress is laid on present hope, expectations and promises about what may be happening. <sup>1</sup> Considering eschatology from this angle, it is obvious not only its meaningful relation to time and history, but also its close relationship to God. Christians see human life and history held in the hands of God. They see the natural order as dependant upon the Creator. They see this life as an inconclusive

experience, preparing them for another one to come. Eschatology, then, relates to the meaning of history, because God is the Creator and Preserver of history. Every act of the historical drama is meaningful. No historical act is too insignificant to be outside God's interest. Consequently, the fulfillment and the end of history has a sense of telos, that is, the moral and spiritual culmination of history is beyond history itself. It implies the restoring of the relationship God-man in eternity.<sup>2</sup> At this point, it is necessary to affirm the close connection between eschatology and the expression "Kingdom of God." As a matter of fact, Biblical scholars refer to the "Kingdom of God," *Malkut* and *Basileia Theou*, in Hebrew and Greek respectively, as directly related to eschatology. At the same time, several interpretations have been given to these words, referred to by Jesus Christ Himself. Thus, eschatology is interpreted in different ways. Let us briefly comment on some of these viewpoints.

"Kingdom of God:" Common Interpretations. Humanistic viewpoints deny the significance of the "Kingdom of God" as preached by Jesus. They propose instead an eschatological significance of history itself. All claims to unique human immortality or eschatological theories of history are held to be an expression of wish fulfillment, a vain reading into nature of human hope and fancy. Nature for the humanist is blind to human purposes and indifferent to human ideals.<sup>3</sup>

Among Christian interpreters of the "Kingdom of God," Ritschl appears late in the nineteenth century, starting from another point: Christ and culture. By means of the idea of the "Kingdom of God," Ritschl achieved the complete reconciliation of Christianity and culture. Mankind, through the reciprocal moral action of its members,

transcends all natural and particular considerations. Eschatological hope in the manifestation of God is lacking here. Rather it is a non-eschatological faith in the present rule of the transcendent Lord of heaven and earth.<sup>4</sup>

T. Manson represents another non-eschatological interpretation. According to him, the "Kingdom of God" in its essence is the reign of God in the experience of the individual soul. In such a personal relationship, questions about time--present or future--are quite irrelevant, for the reign of God within the lives of men is independent of temporal and spatial relations.<sup>5</sup>

A. Schweitzer proposes a different outlook, the so-called consistent eschatology. For him three elements are present in Jesus' message. First, apocalyptic is an essential component in Jesus' understanding of the Kingdom. Second, Jesus' message is exclusively eschatological. In no sense could the Kingdom be interpreted as a present spiritual reality. Finally, Jesus thought that the Kingdom would come at once in His lifetime. As a result of this interpretation, Jesus should be more concerned by expectancy rather than love.<sup>6</sup>

Realized eschatology is supported by G. E. Ladd. He sees two redemptive acts in the expression "Kingdom of God:" The historical, where God is now acting in events to bring about a fulfillment of the Messianic salvation, and the eschatological, where God will act at the end of history to bring His Kingdom to its consummation. It is important to point out that these two redemptive acts are in fact one redemptive event in two parts. The eschatological Kingdom has itself invaded history in advance, bringing to men, living under the curse of sin and death, the blessings of God's rule. History has not been

abandoned to evil; it has become a cosmic struggle between the "Kingdom of God" and the powers of evil.<sup>7</sup>

Seventh-day Adventists' interpretation of the eschatology and the "Kingdom of God" is, in a certain way, similar to that of Ladd, but should not be confused with it. According to the Seventh-day Adventist Dictionary and Encyclopedia, the "Kingdom of God" has a present spiritual phase that is to culminate in the future kingdom of glory to be set up at Christ's second coming, where He will appear in glory (Matt. 25:31). Therefore, Seventh-day Adventists oppose the humanistic, rationalistic, and naturalistic philosophers who have been faced by the acute problem of finding meaning to history, in a world in which catastrophies of the last years seem to them to be without meaning. It becomes relevant, then, that God is indeed the Lord of history and He is going to appear again on the earth to bring history to a victorious and glorious consummation.<sup>8</sup> From what has been stated above, it emerges that Adventists emphasize both: The present kingdom of grace and the future kingdom of glory which is future and eschatological (Matt. 13:41-43).

Eschatological Emphasis of the Adventist Message. From the beginning of the Adventist Movement in the nineteenth century, emphasis has been given upon eschatological events. The signs of the times were quite relevant through the Adventist Movement. On the other hand, it is evident that at the same time two facts were significant outside the Movement or the Church. First, the dominant world adhered to the premise that a perfect society could be achieved on this earth, as was supported by the followers of the idea of progress. Second, the apparition of new trends in theological issues and Biblical interpretation,

such as the represented by Schleiermacher and Ritschl, who in different ways contributed to secularize Biblical doctrines, among them the doctrine concerning Biblical eschatology, which becomes completely irrelevant.

Eschatology in Present Seventh-day Adventist Perspective. Since the doctrine of the "Kingdom of God" in its eschatological meaning continues to be significant in the message of the church, some conclusions may be helpful at this point.

First of all, eschatology must be always theocentric. By contrast, the humanistic outlook minimizes God's role in history. The basis for a sound eschatology must be God Himself, Christ as a Person. It should be remembered that the central message of the church was, and actually is, "Fear God and give Him glory..." (Rev. 14:6). The emphasis should not be primarily upon the state of affairs, or dates, even signs by themselves. It is a risky situation to preach eschatology as an end in itself. Perhaps this perspective has been erroneous, although unwillingly stressed, sometimes, by faithful believers who are expecting the end. But the will of God is the central theme in the "Kingdom of God." Eschatology finds its significance in its relationship to history, for both are concerned chiefly with the will of God. It is God's ultimate purpose--the hope of the kingdom. That kingdom never can be separated from God, but is only a more pregnant expression for Himself. Eschatology is centered in God who is the Person, not signs which are events. This does not mean that the predictive aspect of prophecy should be minimized. This was meaningful in Jesus' preaching, but the emphasis was not the future per se, but the will of God, the right relationship with Him, the last encounter with Him.

Teaching and preaching eschatology implies an ethical sense also. What does that mean? The prophetic promises in Jesus' teaching had ethical emphasis, since men who were to enter His kingdom had to be born again. The future is a day of hope and promise only for those who are faithful to God; therefore, a constant ethical demand is laid upon His followers, to turn from their sins and to submit to God. The precious hope to enter the eschatological kingdom tomorrow requires man to be ready, in the right relationship with God today. Faith and hope in the coming kingdom, without a consistent Christian life, both in beliefs and personal commitment in service, are in vain (Matt. 25).

Last, but not least, a proper understanding of eschatology means to keep watch from the real dangerous trends of secularization (Matt. 24:42). Christians must be aware of changing supernatural expectations concerning hope in Christ's intervention in history, by purely human concern for eschatological events, as it has been understood in modern Christian circles.

### The Idea of Progress

Toward a Definition of the Idea of Progress. Several historical authors have been concerned with the idea of progress in history. Outstanding among them, Bury and Nisbet may be mentioned. Both refer broadly to this idea. Bury tells us about the concept of progress as a hypothesis. He states:

Continuous progress in man's knowledge of his environment, which is one of the chief conditions of general progress, is a hypothesis which may or may not be true. Believing in it is an act of faith. It is based on an interpretation of history which regards were as slowly advancing in a definite and desirable direction, and infers that this progress will continue indefinitely.<sup>11</sup>

Since knowledge is intrinsically related only to reason, according to human standards, it becomes natural that the idea of intellectual progress applied to the social field should guarantee the general progress of man. Social evils were due neither to innate disabilities of human beings nor to the nature of things itself, but to ignorance and prejudices; therefore, the improvement of human life and the attainment of felicity would be only a matter of eliminating ignorance and removing errors, increasing knowledge and expanding the light of culture. The idea of progress is based on human virtues. This means the secularizing of human values. History for their supporters has no room for the acting God. He is not in the observable human experience. Progress is rooted in humanism and naturalism. It supposes that man is capable of a knowledge that is completely objective and certainly it is centered upon man's moral or spiritual condition on earth. It is strongly confident on scientism and technicism. As Goudzwaard states, technology has become a saving guide, a mediator between man<sup>12</sup> and God. It is the dawn of a new world.

The idea of progress appears closely connected with the human aspirations of freedom and power. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mainly from the enlightenment period, philosophers, historians, scientists, and politicians considered freedom and liberty as sacred. Gradually men held the conviction that historical progress delivers man until he becomes the master of his own historical destiny. On the other hand, progress was equated with power. Development of human power linked the doctrines of nationalism, statism, utopianism, and racism, with the perspective of progress.<sup>13</sup> Power is considered as a kind of liberation or human self-redemption on earth.

Thus, the theory of progress was to replace the theory of providence, which resulted in the increasing abandonment of God as the center of human concern. Progress, in the words of Burckhardt,<sup>14</sup> involved the advancement of the material life and--as an expression of spiritual and moral life--all social intercourse, technologies, arts, literature and sciences. This is a wholistic outlook, but it deals entirely with a humanistic realm.

Development of the Idea of Progress. As far as the purpose of this paper, the development of the idea of progress will be referred to very succinctly.<sup>15</sup> It is important to point out that the idea of progress, systematically developed, was conceived in the eighteenth century. However, some of its roots can be traced a couple of centuries prior to that period.

Although the Greeks had a humanistic and rationalistic outlook of history, they could not develop an idea of historical progress because of their cyclical concept of time and history. Augustine, in the fourth century, introduced the linear vision of history in the West; he was influenced by his Judeo-Christian outlook on that matter. He envisioned a universal history which would endure until his own lifetime, so long as to enable the Deity to gather the predestined number of saved people. For him the telos of history accomplished the transcendent intervention of God in history. His vision determined historical thinking for many centuries.

Bodin, who lived in the sixteenth century, expressed an optimistic view of history. He rejected the theory of degeneration. He acknowledged that his own age was in some respect superior to the age of classical antiquity in respect to the sciences and arts. He envisioned a

human solidarity among the peoples of the earth. He asserted that history depends largely on the will of men. In conclusion, he became nearer the idea of progress than any one else before him. Nisbet calls him the morning star of the age that paves the way to history and progress.

E. L. Tuveson, referring to Nisbet's book, suggests that the Puritans from the seventeenth century, in a certain way, had an influence on the idea of progress. As far as their apocalyptic expectancies of a spiritual state of bliss will be upon them, so they will ascend to a higher way of life on earth.

An interesting forerunner of the idea of progress is G. Vico, although he represents the providentialist view of history. Within this belief he states that science would become more autonomous and self-sufficient in the next generation.

The intellectual contribution both of Bacon and Descartes, at the seventeenth century, proved to be a more solid basis for the future development of progress. They liberated science and philosophy from Greek-Roman authority. They made a frank recognition of the value of knowledge to satisfy human needs. They proposed the certainty that knowledge will continually progress on the basis of the invariability of laws of nature, which affirmed science on sure foundations. Bacon defended the principle that proper aim of knowledge is the amelioration of human life--to increase men's happiness and mitigate their sufferings. According to him, the true object of investigation is to establish the reign of man over nature. In respect to Descartes, he affirmed two positive axioms: The supremacy of reason and the invariability of the laws of nature. The first challenged God's authority, the last challenged the Providence's role in nature.

The idea of progress reached its maturity at the eighteenth century, with such supporters as Voltaire. He thought that wars and religions had been the great obstacles to the progress of humanity. If they were abolished, with the prejudices which engender them, the world would rapidly improve. In his opinion, whatever course the development of mankind could take, the nature of human reason would have insured progress in civilization.

The Encyclopaedists substantiated the idea of human perfectibility through the influence of laws and institutions. They marked, therefore, an important stage in the development of the doctrine of progress.

A peculiar viewpoint was presented by Mercier, who in 1770 wrote The Year 2440, a kind of science-fiction writing, where he describes the awakening of an eighteenth century man in the year 2440. He envisioned, among other things, nations living in solidarity, wars are uncommon, slavery has been abolished, the church is returned to primitive Christian patterns. Private hospitality is so large that inns have disappeared. There are not fines or imprisonment, but there are only admonitions. Deism is the religion. There is no one who does not believe in God. Every one has to work, but working is pleasant, no longer resembling slavery.

The French Revolution also helped to nurture progress ideals. One of the outstanding leaders of the idea of progress was Condorcet. He wrote in 1793 his famous: Esquisse d' un Tableau: Historique des Progress de l'Esprit Humain. He spoke about the successive changes in human society, and thus in its successive modifications, he saw the advancement of the human species toward truth or happiness. He saw an indissoluble union between intellectual progress, liberty, virtue, the

respect for natural rights, and the effect of science in the destruction of prejudice. He stated:

"The human race freed from all its fetters, withdrawn from the empire of chance as from that of the enemies of progress, would walk with firm and assured step in the way of truth, of virtue and happiness."<sup>16</sup>

Among the Germans, Kant, Fichte and Hegel appear as great defenders of the idea of progress, particularly in their concept on freedom and reason, in their understanding of mankind. They envisioned a state in which all the relations of life shall be ordered according to reason.

As a derivation from German idealism appeared Positivism with Comte and Communism with Marx and Engels. Both streams of thinking supported the idea of progress. For Comte, the movement of history pushes man to ameliorate his condition incessantly, to develop in all ways, his physical, moral and intellectual life. Consistently, political, moral and intellectual progress are inseparable from material progress. Concerning Socialism, earlier the Utopian socialists and later the Marxian communists agreed that vice and misery were the result of bad social institutions only; therefore, institutions and laws can be so changed as to abolish misery and vice.

Progress was greatly strengthened by the doctrine of evolution. Darwin's theory was welcomed by liberals, both on the ground of progress and because it gave new arguments against orthodox theology.

During the twentieth century, much of the human aspirations expressed by way of the ideal of progress have been dramatically frustrated as we will refer below. However, there are many people and groups who are increasingly promoting hope in progress. For instance, Sire tells us something about the ideals of progress that the New

Consciousness proclaims.<sup>17</sup> They speak about perfection: Healthy, well adjusted, perfectly happy people; no war, no famine, no pollution; just transcendent joy.

The Idea of Progress Challenged. The twentieth century showed the fragility of the idea of progress mainly through the two world wars. Even those who fully accept the scientific and material progress of the nineteenth century have come to realize the dangers and instability of the new order. They mention as examples, social parasitism and physical degeneration in the enormous agglomerations of badly housed humanity which everywhere accompanied the progress of industrialism.<sup>18</sup> The five main premises from the Greeks to our days which supported the progress in history have been challenged: 1. Belief in the value of the past. 2. Conviction of the nobility, even superiority of western civilization. 3. Acceptance of the worth of economic and technological growth. 4. Faith in reason. 5. Belief in the intrinsic importance of life in this earth. Each of these premises has been severely challenged by doubt and disillusionment.<sup>19</sup> Some modern exponents of the new scientific world view are, among those who feel pessimistic concerning the idea of progress,<sup>20</sup> T. H. Huxley and B. Russell, for instance.

Even in literature, contemporary writers reflect that kind of pessimism about the future. Orwell, in his 1984, describes a dark, naked and hungry world. The optimistic hopes from the beginning of the XX century, based on the development of science and technology, never became reality. By contrast, it appears a world that goes backward, where brainwashing makes people fanatic, ignorant and credulous. It is a world of hate and fear, where slavery,<sup>21</sup> public executions, tortures and banishment are common practices.

The Idea of Progress' Implicit Risks for Christian Eschatology. What does the progress idea mean for Christians? Although the idea of progress, as was conceived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has been seriously challenged, are not we living in an age where the idea of progress still underlies culture? What are the major risks for Christians who face the undergrounded vestiges of progress? The following suggestions may be the answers to these questions.

1. Man deifies himself. From the time of the Greeks comes the famous sentence: "Man is the measure of all things" (Protagoras). Modern humanism has assumed preeminence since the Renaissance, and the essence of modern humanism is that humanity deifies itself. Pico della Mirandola's Oration on the Dignity of Man is meaningful to this particular fact.<sup>22</sup> Man postulates complete autonomy. Man becomes a law (*nomos*) unto himself (*autos*). The secular modern mind feels that things are, on the whole, under control. Its confidence lies on the sure basis of knowledge, the only reliable source of meaning and value.<sup>23</sup> Secularism makes earthly happiness and well-being its primary concern.

2. Humanism leads to pride. Sense of power and self-sufficiency leads man to pride. Pride is a consequence of power giving man a false security. As Reinhold Niebuhr states, achievements of modern science are necessary and inevitable. Ignorance and obscurantism are not to be preferred to them. But "cursed be the man that trusteth in man."<sup>24</sup>

3. Man's pride leads to the secularization of history. To postulate the absolute authority of man over history, making him his own master of history, implies a secularized redemptive history and eschatology of progress toward a final state of blessedness. History is valid for its own sake.<sup>25</sup>

4. Man's pride and secularized history leads him to forsake God. At this stage, connotations of the idea of progress, per se, reach the pivotal issue for mankind, the rejection of God Himself. Richard Niebuhr, commenting on Augustine, says that man is created to worship God, and depends on the Goodness which made him good. As his primary goodness consists in adhering to God, so his primal sin lies in turning away from God to himself, or to some inferior value. <sup>26</sup> What a tragedy to fall beyond the point of salvation, because the society which has lost God becomes sooner or later lost itself, according to God's Revelation (Jer. 15:5,6).

Eschatology and Progress in a Realistic Perspective. Both Christians and nonbeliever humanists might assume prejudicial positions against each other. Christians might challenge progressists by overemphasizing disasters, immorality or death. On the other hand, progressive humanists might overemphasize an optimistic outlook against Christians, such as the amelioration of the standard of living, improvement in efficient social organization, or the success of medicine.

What viewpoint should Christian educators, both in the areas of religion and history, keep in mind? The answer is reality. There are evidences either for eschatology or progress. That is a realistic approach. Although Christian teachers have a unique world view and control beliefs, these assumptions, in any case, should be an excuse for accepting objective reality in history. From this starting point, it may be possible to attempt to integrate faith and learning.

Eschatology as a Realistic Approach. Christians see history in its whole meaning. The important thing is its general design or pattern. For Christians, history is seen as a struggle between two forces. That

idea is consistently supported by Biblical prophets and Christ Himself. Modern history of mankind does present evidences of evil which, at the same time, are eschatological in meaning. That hope of ultimate restoration gives a Christian both direction and purpose. Viewed thus, confusing and chaotic events in history will take on a new meaning. History will soon reach its divine end: The establishment of the "Kingdom of God." Among those eschatological events, Seventh-day Adventists have been pointing out the following:

A. Increase of wickedness. Crime in a variety of ways is on the rise in almost every country of the world (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

B. Sexual revolution. Today sex is idolized through television, films, videos, songs, magazines and advertisements. Sexual liberation has resulted in the rise of the rate of divorce, mateswapping, sexual abuse of children, abortion, widespread homosexuality and lesbianism, venereal diseases and recently AIDS (Matt. 24:37-39).

C. Natural disasters. Through all history disasters have occurred, but in recent years their scope has increased in destruction because of growth population on earth (Luke 21:10-11).

D. Wars and calamities. Although wars have plagued humanity throughout history, never before have they been so destructive and universal as World Wars I and II. Never before has man had the real possibility to destroy every life over the world, through thermonuclear war (Matt. 24:6).

E. Famines. Regional famines have been common as in the past; but today, in an overpopulated world, millions are suffering either starvation or malnutrition (Matt. 24:7).

F. Disrupted environment. Industrial and technical development has

resulted in serious damage for ecology. The destruction of the ozone layer in the Antarctic is a major threat.

G. Lack of faith and hope as a result of the abandonment of God. Man has deified himself; consequently, he has lost hope and meaning in life, as some contemporary philosophies reveal (Luke 18:8).<sup>27</sup>

Outstanding as it may be, eschatology is God centered; therefore, signs must never become an end in themselves. Besides, Christ Himself made two warnings: ". . . Such things must happen, but the end is still to come." ". . . It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" (Mark 13:7; Acts 1:7).

A Realistic View of Progress. Christian believers should honestly recognize the spectacular results of science and mechanical technology which has resulted in tremendous materialistic progress. However, meaningful general progression does not necessarily mean the improvement of the human condition, since progress in life can dominate the mind in a sense of purely selfish and materialistic aspirations.<sup>28</sup> It is true that millions in the world are still confident in the results of science and technology, daily stressed by the mass media. But contemporary philosophers and thinkers no more endorse the inevitability of progress as a universal law. Many of them are proclaiming nihilism instead, where life is absurd and man is meaningless.

#### CONCLUSION

Christian educators in the areas of religion and history deal with both eschatology and the idea of progress. Although the concepts appear to be contradictory, the teacher should find a way of integrating faith and learning into the interpretation of these issues. In contemporary

humanism, eschatology has lost the proper place of God's intervention in history; therefore, it is necessary to restore it to its Biblical basis. On the other hand, the idea of progress has lifted man to deify himself, which makes it necessary to place him in the proper Biblical perspective; namely, a being created in God's image.

Many educators in the past have stressed eschatology reducing to a minimum the demonstrations of man's progress. Humanist educators have stressed faith in man's progress overlooking man's false solutions to human problems. Therefore, a balanced and realistic approach is needed in a sound integration of faith and learning. A Christian world view contributes to lessen humanistic utopian hopes and, at the same time, it encourages hope amidst the pessimistic vision of modern thinkers.

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