

# TEACHING THE IDEA OF THE "LAST TIME" IN CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

*by Mr. Peter Vander Schaaf*

*Mr. Vander Schaaf teaches U.S. and Church History at Covenant Christian High School. He gave this speech at a sectional of the 1980 P.R.T.I. Convention in N.W. Iowa.*

Contemporary history is a period often neglected in our teaching. This is true, I suppose, because it is chronologically last. Those things that are chronologically earlier, like the Revolution in American history or the French Revolution in world history, are taught in the fall when our energy is greatest and when the school year stretches out before us, seemingly an endless length of time. By May we begin to realize that time is growing short, and that we must hurry if we hope to make it to World War II. June usually comes and goes with contemporary history having received only a lick and a promise.

Contemporary history ought not to be so neglected. It is the period of history in which both we and our students are called to do the work of Christ's church and live as pilgrims and strangers. Some understanding of the contemporary situation is essential to that calling. Also, God's counsel has continued to unfold. Those things which God has foretold concerning the last times appear clearly to anyone who is observant. The child of God who is a student must learn to recognize those signs of the times. He must learn to see in the age in which he lives, the truth of the statement found in I John 2:18, "Little children, it is the last time."

It is, then, necessary for the covenant child to understand what is meant by the term "last time" and to recognize basic characteristics of the present age in order for him to see the fulfillment of Scripture's prophecies. He must be able to see the signs of Christ's coming in the age in which he lives.

We have to begin with a definition of terms. The last time is that age between Pentecost and the final day of judgement. During this age Christ sits at the right hand of the Father and prepares all things for the appearance of His kingdom. In the last time God pours His Spirit out into the hearts of His people and dwells among them. The people of God see by faith that the types and shadows, the prophets have all been fulfilled in Christ. Our risen Lord now reigns in heaven and from there gathers, defends, and preserves His church. All that remains is the gathering in of the last of God's people and the final deliverance of the church through the judgement of the world.

Contemporary history is less easily defined. It cannot be taken to be that history that has taken place during our lifetimes. That is different for each one of us. History is not as precise as we would like it to be in its trends and directions, and so we must accept a certain amount of ambiguity in any attempted periodization. I think that it would be sufficient for our purposes to say that contemporary history begins when the elements or problems that exist in the world today first take visible shape.<sup>1</sup> Some of these elements are: industrialization and advanced technology, scientific or rational social and economic planning on the part of governments, the decline of Europe and the development of a world wide politics. We will say that contemporary history begins with the Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth century.

When we teach contemporary history, as with all of our teaching, we must use Scripture often. Protestant Reformed teachers must be able to explain to their students the specific things that characterize the last time and the things that are characteristic of the contemporary period. Our students must learn that if they are to understand the present age, they must begin with Scripture.

Scripture gives us several characteristics of the last times. First, during the last time men will hate God and His church. We find this in several texts. Matthew 24:9-12 reads,

Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you; and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.

With this hatred of God and His people we must include the apostasy of which the Scripture informs us in I Timothy 4:1-2. We read there,

“Now the Spirit speaketh expressly that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their conscience seared with a hot iron;...”

In Matthew 24:24-25 Christ warns the church,

“For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets and shall shew great signs and wonders, insomuch that, if it were possible they will deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before.”

That brings us to the second point. During the last times anti-christs will arise. This we see in I John 2:18.

“Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that anti-christ shall come, even now are there many anti-christs; whereby we know that it is the last time.”

The idea of the anti-christ is one that our students should well understand. We cannot now give an exposition of the several texts that refer to anti-christ. For now Revelation 13 will be enough. You may want to refer to that chapter. We see there that the anti-christ will have great authority and power over men, and that he receives his power from the devil. We read that he will blaspheme God and put himself in the place of God by receiving worship of all men. The anti-christ will perform lying wonders. He will demand obedience and place his mark upon all. Those who refuse the mark will have no right to buy or sell. They will have no place on the earth. The anti-christ will receive power when his head, the head “as it were wounded to death” is healed. In other words, the anti-christ is held back, restricted until the Lord’s appointed time. But until then the spirit of anti-christ will be in the world. There will be men and nations throughout the last time who will attempt to do what the anti-christ will finally accomplish. The spirit of anti-christ opposes God and seeks for itself a dominion over the hearts and minds of men. It seeks a dominion in which men will marvel at the power and wisdom of the one who can work wonders, and will obey.

Third, God will gather His church and at the same time judge the nations until the time appointed for the coming of the beast. This is evident in the apostle John's vision of the four horsemen in Revelation 6. These four horsemen ride throughout the world until the day of anti-christ in order to foil the work of the old dragon, Satan, who would give all authority to the beast. You remember that the vision of the horsemen consisted of the riders of the white horse, the red horse, the black horse, and the pale horse. By the rider of the white horse, the Word of God goes out conquering and to conquer. Those ordained to life are called to life, those to death given over to death. These revile God, devise heresies and cultic doctrines, despise God's people. They harden themselves and seek the false security of an earthly kingdom. By the red horse the nations are afflicted by war and rumors of war. Nations are pitted against each other, and thereby men receive God's judgement on their pride and covetousness. For example, Vietnam and Cambodia presently war with each other. Vietnam, once again united, is strong enough to assert itself over its old enemies. The victims are the Cambodian people. Iraq and Iran are fighting because Iraq seeks to avenge old grudges and because it seeks power among the Middle East nations. The rider of the black horse creates economic imbalance<sup>2</sup> —the difference between rich and poor men, rich and poor nations. Men are moved by envy to hate, kill, steal, and make war. Societies are torn (or motivated) by class hatred and nations war to take from each other. By way of example, the poor nations of our day band together in the United Nations, the Organization of African States, or the Non-Aligned Nations Conference and berate the industrial powers for "imperialism" and "racism" and demand for themselves a more equal share of the world's abundance. The pale horse reaps the harvest of death and feeds hell who follows after him. His tools are war, hunger, the beasts of the earth, and natural disasters. This rider inflicts God's judgement on man's sin. He cuts man down who would otherwise increase in wickedness and hatred for God and His church. The most recent example of the work of this horseman is the earthquake in Algeria which is reported to have caused the death of 20,000 people, injured 50,000 and left 250,000 homeless.

In summary, the last time is the era in which the spirit of anti-christ will manifest itself. Men will hate God and follow every evil thought. Nations will rise to seek dominion and the wealth of other nations. Anti-christs will attempt to take God's

place as the objects of faith and obedience. These efforts God will foil until His appointed time. The Word will go out and God's people will be gathered. War, envy and strife will divide men and nations. Death will cut short the sin of men and will fill their cups of iniquity in the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

I think it is worthwhile to discuss briefly the problems involved in using Scripture in the teaching of history. Two things must be avoided. The first danger is that Scripture is held to be an authoritative guide in the study of history, but only in its intent—that which concerns the salvation and walk of the people of God, not in the specific content of Scripture's prophesy concerning the last time. As an example of what I mean, I refer you to an article in the book *A Christian View of History?*, edited by George Marsden and Frank Roberts (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1975). The article is by Prof. Marsden. It is entitled, "A Christian Perspective for the Teaching of History." Under the section entitled "Our Knowledge of God's Actions in History" Marsden explains that we know that God acts in history and that there will be a final day of judgement. But that is about all that we can know. Marsden writes,

We know first of all that God is our creator and that he acts in history. He is not merely a first principle of a transcendent abstraction, but a personal God who has decisively entered into and changed human history. We know of God's actions particularly in the history of redemption recorded in Scripture and centering in Christ. We know also that God will continue his redemptive work through the workings of the Holy Spirit in the church, and hence that the highest value and the most meaningful experience for men is knowing and loving God. We know also that human history will end in judgment. We can say therefore that there is meaning in the most fundamental developments in history and that there is a general progression defined by the actions of God in our history. However, to say that there is meaningful general progression does not necessarily mean that there is steady progress (in the sense of improvement). Men's own sinful actions often work against the purposes of God. We cannot say with any assurance, therefore, that the world is generally getting better (an implicit assumption in almost all standard histories, which almost glorify change): nor can we assume that things are generally getting worse. All we do know is that God has worked in our history and is continuing to work, but outside of biblical revelation we do not know clearly his precise purposes in permitting particular historical developments.<sup>3</sup>

Now it is true that we cannot know precisely what God's purpose is in permitting particular historical developments. But it is necessary to believe that God has told us in His Word those things that are going to happen and that are significant for the church of Christ. The Scripture gives us an overview, so to speak, of the New Dispensation. It explains how history will move up until the final judgement. If we do not believe this, then the entire book of Revelation as well as important parts of the Gospels and of the Epistles lose their significance. The Christian history teacher must reflect in his work, the faith that Scripture has given the church the basic elements of the New Dispensation.

The second danger to be avoided is that of reading isolated historical events into the Scriptural prophecies. For instance, in a comic book which is supposed to make the book of Revelation plain to young readers, Hal Lindsey reads into the description of the first woe of Revelation 9 the prophesy of the development of the modern war helicopter. The author of *Haley's Bible Handbook* claims to find in Revelation the prophesy of the invention of gunpowder. Both this approach to Scripture and the one described above destroy most of the importance of God's prophetic Word for the church. It must be understood, and we must teach our students, that God's Word gives to the church, as she exists in every century of the New Dispensation, that which she needs to know in order to be faithful to her calling, and to watch for the coming of Christ.

Admittedly, it is not easy work to apply the Scripture to our teaching of history. Part of the problem is that almost all history books have a secular viewpoint. These portray the history of the modern world as the history of progress—progress in terms of technological advance, improved standards of living, and increased cooperation among the nations. We must work hard to clear ourselves of this bias. It can be accomplished with a thorough knowledge of Scripture and with wide reading in those authors who do attempt to give a Christian interpretation of events. We have to use our discernment even with most of these, but there are several that are worthwhile. One of these is *How Shall We Then Live?* by Francis Schaeffer which offers a Christian evaluation of the philosophy of each age of the New Dispensation. Schaeffer emphasizes the modern period. There are two books by Jacques Ellul that are worth reading. *The Betrayal of the West* (Seabury Press, New York, 1978) explains the importance of the Christian tradition in Western civilization and

devastating effects of the denial of that tradition. *The New Demons* (Seabury Press, New York, 1975) portrays the religious nature of our ostensibly secular culture. Ellul explains what are the gods of our day and what things are accepted as infallible authorities by contemporary man.

I will state the basic elements of contemporary history in six categories. Certainly no claims to exclusive authority are made for this list. Each teacher should use it simply as a guide.

The first element is the decline of Europe and the appearance of a world-wide politics. Beginning with the outbreak of World War I, and obviously so since World War II, Europe has lost the deciding role in world politics that she has held since the Renaissance. Since World War II there has existed, first, a bi-polar world with its centers in Washington D.C. and in Moscow. This has given way to a multi-polar world with several foci. These foci are nations and national blocks with economic or military strength, or both. The most important are the United States, the Soviet Union and Soviet Block, China, Western Europe, and the Middle East, Arab nations. None of these dominate others. None are self-sufficient. Each is dependent on some of the others for security and for stable economic growth.

For example, the European Economic Community has only token military strength, but it is an important source of capital and technology for communist and for Third World nations. Its power is economic. But here also the giant has clay feet. Europe is heavily dependent on OPEC (the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) for its oil and increasingly dependent on the Warsaw Pact nations for trade. Consequently, it must tread lightly in the turbulent Middle East, and Europe frets at the renewal of Soviet-American rivalries as detente wears thin. The Soviet Union is primarily a military power. It appears increasingly able to dominate the small nations on its borders and to exert its influence in Africa and the Middle East. But the Soviets seem to move in small advances, possibly to avoid a strong American reaction. The Soviet leadership realizes that another arms race would severely strain their economy and their technology. The Soviet Union depends on imported grain to feed its population and on Western technology for further development of its industry and, we read in the papers, of its military hardware.

The second element is the rise of the Asian and African nations. This has its roots in the imperialism of the nineteenth century. Peoples with ancient and proud cultures were

subjugated by European powers. The subject peoples learned that they had to abandon or radically alter their traditional ways of life if they hoped to throw off foreign domination. They learned to adopt western ways in order to compete with western nations. Typically, these nations, classified as underdeveloped or Third World nations, have adopted western technology, industrial organization, methods of economic and social development and control, and western military techniques. They have largely reflected western ideals of freedom and democracy as unworkable in a time when rapid industrial expansion is needed or as out of step with their needs for national self assertion. Cuba is one example; Vietnam is another. The Peoples' Republic of China is the prototype of the backward Asian nation that threw off foreign influences, achieved internal order, and made rapid economic gains under communism.

The third element is the ideological struggle between communist nations and the western democracies. This has been muted somewhat since the days of detente, but it is still very real. Another way to state the idea would be that there is a struggle for control of the aspirations of men and for the economic and political power that goes with that control. Democracy grew up in nations with liberal traditions, including a strong feeling for the rights of the individual. Both democracy and capitalism have needed a strong middle class and long periods of relative internal peace. Not every nation has been able to meet these conditions. On the other hand, communism has appealed to less developed nations. Some of the reasons for this are: the communist giants, the Soviet Union and China, have achieved remarkable gains in education and in social equality, they have brought about industrial advances at rates much greater than the capitalist nations. The communist program offers a coherent plan for social and economic development. Finally, the Soviet Union and China have, until recently, avoided the opprobrium of imperialism. They have been able to present themselves as the friends of oppressed peoples.<sup>4</sup> In short, communism has appealed to the need of Third World nations for rapid economic and social advance, unity, and national pride. This appeal has been strengthened by the apparent inability of the western powers to protect their interests and the prestige of their ideals in their rivalry with the Soviet Union.

Let me illustrate that last point. In 1975 the Soviet Union used Cuban surrogate forces to overcome the American backed faction in Angola. Since then there has been an increased



presence of Cuban and East German troops in southern Africa and Ethiopia, but the United States has not responded with any effort of its own (in the form of a propaganda campaign, increased aid to allies, offers of aid to potential friends). In the Middle East the Soviet Union exerts an increasingly powerful influence. The Soviets have invaded Afghanistan, backed an invasion of South Yemen (an American friend) by North Yemen, and recently signed a military aid treaty with Syria. Our allies in that area become nervous as American influence wains. Third World nations observe and associate the United States with weakness, the Soviet Union with strength.

Our students must not be taught to identify the cause of the democratic nations with the cause of Christ. Nor must they learn to identify democracy and capitalism with truth. The point is simply that the church of Christ has been able to live and preach in those nations with more liberal traditions. Communist countries have at best tolerated the church and, at worst, tried to drive her out of existence. The spread of communism represents a threat to the peace of God's people in many parts of the world.

The fourth element of the modern world is the adoration given to technology and the state. It is not exaggerating to say that throughout the world, these are the gods of our age.<sup>5</sup> By technology is meant here any effort to control and exploit creation as well as the regulation of social and economic activities to specific goals. The state is that governing authority which organizes, coerces, motivates, and propagandizes society. The authority and activity of the modern state is characterized by an all comprehensiveness. It can and does direct entire populations to the goals set by the ruling group. This is as true of the democratic nations as of the totalitarian governments.

For example, in Soviet Russia income levels are regulated in order to maintain a relative equality of wealth compared to the capitalist nations. All citizens are declared to be equal before the law. The spirit of all education, from the day care center to the university, emphasizes cooperation in service to society and the state. All must work together for the good of the people. Dissenters from this faith are decisively dealt with. I recently read in the weekly magazine *National Review* (July 11, 1980), that the daughters of a Russian couple that had just converted to the Baptist faith were kidnapped by the KGB (the Soviet intelligence service) and sent to an orphanage. After an escape they were returned. Their parents were separated from the other children and the mother sent to a labor camp. Their only crime

was an active faith. 8 In our country education stresses social acclamation. "We must respect the rights of others" read a poster that I saw in a classroom of a public school. Every classroom in the school had signs that said much the same thing. Our income tax and welfare systems are meant to create as much economic equality as is politically feasible. Citizens are instructed in several federal laws that evil consists in social and economic inequality. Affirmative action programs exalt equality over merit, and justice. Christian schools are increasingly suspect as holdouts of racism and must more frequently resist the efforts of the federal government to impose its definition of equality on them.

Technology and the state are held to be the sources, the givers, of salvation. Technology will cure diseases, end shortages, improve living standards, make life good. The state will remove every inequality, end all poverty, stop every injustice. In our day, every problem is a problem for scientific study and, it is expected, will be solved politically.

The analogy with religion can be carried further. Industry and the demands of commerce regulate time and the cycle of life more rigidly than any liturgical calendar. We see in several nations that national leaders are adored as gods. This is true of Lenin in the Soviet Union. In China the works of Mao Tse-tung were meditated upon and exegeted like a scripture. The national holiday is a time set aside in every modern nation to honor the nation or state. May Day and the Fourth of July are both examples.

The October, 1980 issue of *National Geographic* has in it an article on the small, communist nation of Albania. The article is entitled "Albania, Alone Against the World", and it illustrates the point that national leaders and the state begin to replace God as the objects of worship in modern life. The article states in one place,

Albania's new generation knows only atheism. Marxist-leninist faith replaces religious faith. Enver Hoxha's (the Albanian dictator) books, serialized in newspapers, quoted on the radio, gleaned for slogans, serve as a New Testament. Hoxha is hailed as a messiah—infinately wise, farsighted, and benevolent, but also implacable toward his foes.

Living apart from his people in a heavily guarded compound off Fallen Heroes Boulevard, and riding in a curtained Mercedes, Enver Hoxha is omnipresent. His portrait looks down from walls everywhere, even from truck and tractor. His name is carved on hillsides in letters hundreds of feet high. His birthplace...is a national shrine. (p. 554)

The fifth element of contemporary history has to do with those things which are regarded in our age as infallible authorities. No man has ever lived his life without some reference point or some guide. No society can exist without a standard on which to make judgements. Since the Scripture is no longer regarded as authoritative in a formerly Christian nation, and since other cultures have given up their traditional values, the contemporary world has turned to other points of reference. These are science and history. <sup>7</sup>

Both science and history are used to justify, to make legitimate. History makes legitimate the state and its policies. It is used to show the progression of events culminating in the present. It justifies the actions of the state which are always progressive and in line with the trend of things. Those who oppose the state oppose history. They are "reactionary." History glorifies the dizzy heights of progress that the world has attained through technology. Science gives us the facts. It tells us that only human observation and human judgement are reliable. All other sources of knowledge are myth. Something is true if it can be seen, proved, or is rational. Anything else is illusory.

Jacques Ellul writes in *The New Demons* that science and history "tell men of their origin, justify the present, and assure the future." <sup>8</sup> Together they inform our values and our goals. They admit of no other authority. Science and history tell us that what is better than what has been, and that the difference between right and wrong is really the difference between what works and what is ineffective. They tell us, for example, that population growth ought to be controlled, that all men must be economically equal if any real equality is to be achieved, that children may be killed before birth without incurring guilt. To oppose these things is to buck the trend of history. It is to be backward. Science and history assure us that if we continue to trust technology and continue to have faith in the state, we will achieve heaven on earth.

The sixth element is the falling away of the church. In our time this manifests itself in a division between the spiritual deadness of modernism and the false life of unbiblical revival. Denominations that previously held to Reformed or Lutheran confessions now allow their theologians to deny Christ's divinity or the infallibility of Scripture. As a consequence, there is nothing to preach, and spiritual life wanes. Churches stand empty or waste their remaining energies on social programs.

Those who feel that something is wrong turn to the radio ministers or, at best, to the arminian fundamentalism of Billy Graham. The emphasis is on being "born again" or "coming under the blood." One's life is made full and his problems solved when he accepts Jesus as his savior, but few talk of the repentance from sin and a sanctified walk. Some turn to cults. Jim Jones and his group represent the most bizarre of these. The more traditional Mormons are one of the fastest growing cults in the world.

The Roman Catholic world also seems to be dividing over the issues between modern, liberal trends and the traditional instincts of the pope. We should not be fooled by John Paul II. He has called American youth back to spiritual values, and he discouraged the theology of revolution of the South American bishops. But he has also re-affirmed clerical celibacy to the African clergy. He has instructed Dutch Catholics to pray more regularly to Mary. And he deposed the German theologian Hans Küng largely for his questioning of the importance of the priesthood. John Paul's revival is that of traditional catholicism. It is a renewal of idolatry.

In summary, we see that in the contemporary age nations vie with each other for security and prosperity, for power and for national preeminence. There is war and rumor of war. At the same time all realize that a general war would destroy what every nation seeks. Cooperation is observed mainly in the breach, but remains the spirit of the age. In modern society it is assumed that science will reveal every truth, and the state solve every problem. The gospel is seldom heard in all the preaching that is done. Men are called good or evil on the basis of their willingness to serve social policies that are set by the state. In all of this, our students must learn to recognize the signs of the times.

If history has any use at all for the covenant child, it is to help him live his life in service to God. In the study of history the student must improve his ability to say no to the world and to sin and say yes to God. The covenant child must learn wisdom as Revelation 13:18 counts wisdom. The verse reads, "Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred threescore and six."

If we Protestant Reformed history teachers do our work as it should be done, the covenant student will learn to pray with greater understanding, "Come, Lord Jesus. Yea, come quickly."

## Bibliography

- 1 Geoffrey Barraclough, **Contemporary History** (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 20.
- 2 Herman Hoeksema, **Behold, He Cometh!** (Grand Rapids, MI.: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1969), p. 194.
- 3 George Marsden and Frank Roberts eds., **A Christian View of History?** (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 38.
- 4 Barraclough, p. 222.
- 5 Jacques Ellul, **The New Demons** (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975).
- 6 William F. Buckley, **National Review** 32, (July 11, 1980): 822.
- 7 Ellul.
- 8 *ibid.*

"...In the school which the students judged to have the highest level of operational spiritual clout, there was wide student agreement that the most important factor in making theirs a *Christian* high school was the personal interest in and availability of teachers to individual students, especially before, after, and outside of class, and before and after school. Conversation with the faculty in this school was marked by clear articulation and broad agreement, from the most hard-nosed academic English teacher as well as from the most non-academic vocational skills teacher, that they were engaged in shaping productive, committed citizens of God's Kingdom and that their subject matter, both in its mastery and in its interpretation, was *instrumental* to that shared primary goal.

"In contrast, the Christian high school judged by its students to have the least spiritual clout, students unanimously agreed that their teachers did indeed consistently talk about the relationship of the Christian faith to their subject matter in the classroom. But they also agreed that it wasn't catching on among the students primarily because the teachers showed no real interest in them personally outside the classroom, and they believed their teachers clearly demonstrated this disinterest by seldom being available to and personally approachable outside of the formal classroom setting."

quoted from *Christian Home and School*, March, 1980.

"Spiritual Clout in our Christian High Schools—Who Has it? What Controls It?"

by Dr. Dennis Hoekstra, Executive Director of the Barnabas Foundation