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THE CHRISTIAN AND HISTORY

Gordon H. Clark

BECAUSE of the obviously us condition of the world, more and more people have been wondering about the future of our nation, our civilization, and our manner of life. Church members are disturbed by F.B.I, statistics which report:

Fifteen million sex magazines read monthly.

More barmaids than college girls.

One divorce for every five marriages.

Sixty suicides every day.

One murder every 40 minutes.

Seventeen-year-olds, the largest criminal group.

Non-church members may pay more attention to Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, and Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*. The popularity of this subject may be gauged by the fact that the weekly magazine, *Life*, not noted as a scholarly journal, ran an elaborate article on Toynbee.

Both Spengler and Toynbee ask the question, Does history repeat itself? And both answer affirmatively. There are historical laws that describe the course of all civilizations from their birth to their dissolution. And Toynbee is only slightly more optimistic than Spengler about the future of western culture.

DOES HISTORY HAVE MEANING?

It would be extremely interesting to study the details of Spengler and Toynbee. Even where we might disagree most heartily, we would find their views highly stimulating. But for our present purpose, it will be more profitable to alter the problem some what. Instead of our tracing the similarity of development among the various civilizations, instead of focusing attention on the morphology of history, instead of asking merely Does history repeat itself; we can better ask, Does history have any significance?

Suppose with Spengler that each society runs its life course. And other societies follow. What of it? Is there any significance in it? Suppose something quite similar with Toynbee. One society gives birth to a second and then dies. Is this not the same thing as one generation of mosquitoes giving birth to another generation of mosquitoes and then another, and another? What is the end of all this? Karl Marx and Bertrand Russell say that the end is cosmic death. The distribution of energy in the universe will be equalized, the planet will freeze, life will be extinguished, and the eternal atoms will rumble along unmindful of the brief accident that was human life.

The Stoics of antiquity and Nietzsche of last century were more optimistic. They held that after world history is complete, the show will be given over again. Like a reel of movies, everything will happen again as it has this time. And so on for endless cycles. The film will not wear out; it just continues ever the same.

But is this optimism? Or is it pessimism? Neither in Russell's view nor in Nietzsche's does history have any significance. Whether we shall dissolve into atoms with nothing remaining of human hopes, fears, joys, and sorrows, or whether we fight World War I, and World War II, and World War III, only to fight them over again next time—in either case there is only a negative answer to the question, Has history a purpose? Cosmic death and cosmic cycles are equally uninspiring.

Now it may possibly be that pessimism is the final word. It may possibly be that the human race exists only to meet complete and ultimate frustration. It may possibly be that history is devoid of significance.

But before adopting this dismal view of things, would it not be wise to ask whether there are any other theories? Do we not at least have the right to ask what is implied in a theory that gives significance to history? How could we possibly know whether history and human life have meaning and value unless we consider the more hopeful as well as the more pessimistic view?

Accordingly we ask, what must be true if history and life have meaning?

DOES HISTORY HAVE A GOAL?

The pessimistic theories deprived human life of significance by denying that history has a *goal*. In the theories mentioned the human race was doomed to extinction and oblivion, or else it was condemned to repeat and repeat the events of this world in cycles without end. Conversely, therefore, if significance is to be assigned to human life, extinction and oblivion is not the end. Nor are repeated cycles. Significance requires a purpose for which history takes place. A purpose or a goal is the prerequisite for assigning a value to life. One cycle may have a beginning and an end; but an endless series

of cycles has no end, no purpose, no goal. A goal is something final, something ultimate, something permanent. Mere change, constant change, aimless motion, is not purposeful. For change to be purposeful, it must have a direction. And a direction is determined by an end or goal. Progress, likewise, is possible only when there is a goal. Many people believe that mankind has been making progress; they believe that we today are better off than our ancestors. The idea of progress has been and still is popular. At this moment, however, I am not asserting progress as a fact; and I am certainly not approving the popular notion of what progress consists in. I am merely pointing out that if there is to be progress of any sort, there must be a goal toward which we may progress.

The goal cannot be merely the end of a cycle that is to be repeated again. A true goal is final, ultimate, and permanent. Accordingly, if history is to be granted significance, something must happen once for all. The end must occur once, and endure. And if the end can occur but once, it also follows that the various means to that end can occur but once. The whole historical process must consist of a series of unique events that usher in the culmination. There may be similarities among the means. One civilization may pass through stages that are similar to the stages of another civilization. In this sense history may repeat itself. The book of Judges shows how history repeated itself many times. The victorious Jews forsook God; they were defeated by their enemies; a leader called them to repentance; and God restored them to favor and delivered them from the oppression of their enemies. But Deborah lived only once; and Gideon lived only once; and Samson lived only once; and Christ died *once for all*.

CHRISTIANITY AND HISTORY

Secular interest in the philosophy of history is distinctly a modern phenomenon. None of the Greek philosophers over a period of a thousand years made it a subject of study. Some of them, like Plato and Aristotle, were interested in theories of politics; and in tracing the development of political institutions they perforce paid some attention to historical antecedents. But they had no theory of history. In contrast with this secular neglect of history, Christianity has always been strongly historical. Christianity is historical, not just in the sense that it has had a history, but in the sense that it has had a theory of history. It finds significance in historical events—in fact it finds the center of all significance in history. Some systems of philosophy are based on studies of physics or science; occasionally they claim that historic fact is unimportant and especially unimportant for religion. But the Christian system makes history its touchstone. In history its evidence is clearly and adequately seen, and in history the meaning of all the universe is found. The least important of several important considerations is that Christianity views past history as a source of instruction for present generations. The events of the Old

Testament are intended to teach the children of God the spiritual lessons they need to learn. Reference has been made to the book of Judges. The events of that book were designed to teach them that God requires obedience and punishes disobedience. They did not learn any too well. And it was not until the bitter Babylonian captivity that they finally and completely abolished idolatry. But this is not all.

The events of the Old Testament are not only designed to teach the Jews; they are designed for our instruction also. Speaking of events that occurred during the journey through the wilderness, Paul in I Cor. 10:6, 11 says that these events were examples to us and they were written for our admonition. In Gal. 4:22ff Paul shows how the lives of Hagar and Sarah exemplify the gospel. And the Epistle to the Hebrews is permeated with the notion that Old Testament history gives the gospel message in elementary form.

THE CHRISTIAN VIEW

However, while it is of great practical importance to know that history is thus instructive in function, this is of less importance than another matter. History could be a series of disjointed events and still be instructive; but far from being disjointed, history is a process so planned that the early events prepare for the later events. In particular the events of the Old Testament, the call of Abraham, the separation of the Jews, the establishment of the theocracy, all prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah. The ritual typology also indicates this, even though obscurely. The explicit prophecies state the matter so as to leave no doubt. Two centuries before Cyrus was born, the prophet mentioned him by name and predicted that he and the Persians would rebuild Jerusalem. Almost five centuries before Christ was born, the prophet stated definitely that the Messiah would come within 490 years. And in the fulness of time Christ came. And the fact that He came, that He was crucified, and that He rose from the grave, leads to another and still more important fact about history. It is perhaps the most important fact about history. It is that history is the scene of God's activity. The significance of history according to the Christian view is not that men can learn a spiritual lesson or two. It is not that early events prepare for later events. But rather history is significant because in history *God acts*.

(To be continued)

THE CHRISTIAN AND HISTORY

Part Two

Gordon H. Clark

It is not exaggeration to say that the incarnation of Christ, and especially His death and resurrection are the most important events of history. But while these are the most important *events*, they are not themselves the Christian philosophy of history. These events shows that Christianity ascribes significance to history, but a statement of the Atonement is not the most general formulation of the Christian view of history. The Bible has much more to say; and in order to have a more comprehensive understanding, one ought first to collect a number of its statements and then summarize them if possible.

It would be impossible in a short space to compile any great number of relevant passages. But even a meager selection can show the general tenor of Biblical teaching.

Daniel 2:21. "And he (God) changeth the times and the seasons; he removeth kings and setteth up kings."

Daniel 4:35. "And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?"

Acts 17:26. "And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation."

Ephesians 1:11. "Being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will."

These with many other passages may be summarized accurately in the words of the Shorter Catechism:

"God ... hath foreordained what soever comes to pass."

History occurs strictly according to God's eternal decree. He planned it; He sees the end from the beginning; and the means He uses will not be in vain—they shall accomplish what God pleases and they shall prosper in the thing whereto God has sent them.

God's perfect control of history is a doctrine that is particularly cherished by Presbyterians. It is an essential doctrine of Calvinism. In the Westminster Confession of Faith, it occurs under the title "Of God's Eternal Decree." Similar in wording to the Shorter Catechism, the Confession begins with the sentence "God from all eternity *did*, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass. ..." More popularly this doctrine is known under the name of Predestination; and it permeates the Calvinistic system: I am willing to say, it permeates the

Bible. Unless God controls history, there would be no such thing as Providence. Unless God controls history, we could have no firm basis for assurance of salvation. It is entirely to the point to notice that those forms of Christianity which deny predestination are unable to give their adherents any assurance that they will be saved. They must say that if a person happens to die in a state of grace, he will be received into heaven; but, alas, we cannot count on God to preserve a person in the state of grace. But Presbyterians say, and the Bible says:

“And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.” (Jn. 10:28)

“Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” (Phil. 1:6)

“Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” (1 Peter 1:5)

Assurance of salvation, and predestination on which assurance is based, are blessed doctrines, and we will not give them up. On the contrary, we rejoice that we ourselves and all history with us are under God's omnipotent control.

To the eye that is unenlightened by divine revelation the present course of events seems ominous. Even the most optimistic historians believe that dark days are more likely than days of peace and plenty. The less optimistic historians may confess that World War III and the obliteration of civilization is inevitable. No wonder sober people are disturbed. But the Christian has a sure hope that others can not share. Where others can see only the danger of a war that will involve Arabs, Jews, Russians, and Americans, we think we can see the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy. We think we can see the hand of God in history today, as it has not been seen for the last 1900 years. How long it will take for the Jews to gather in Palestine, what sufferings they and the world must pass through, and when the next great event in prophecy will occur, no man knows. But we see clearly that history is nearing its culmination. Recall the earlier argument about the significance of history. History to be significant must have a goal. And Christianity reveals to us what that goal is. It is the consummation effected by Christ at His return. Whatever may be the immediate future, "the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth; and (he) shall suddenly come to his temple . . . but who may abide the day of his coming? for he is like a refiner's fire . . . and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness."

Just how this is to happen, just what events precede it, we do not know. It does not necessitate the survival of our civilization or of our nation. God has determined the pre-appointed time and the boundaries of our habitation. But exactly what time God has preappointed for western culture, no man

knows. We do know, however, that no nation can possibly continue to exist beyond its time, for it is God that changeth the times and seasons, and removeth kings and setteth up kings.

History therefore goes on its pre determined way, and it will go on to the catastrophic end God has planned for it. Christ will come on the clouds of heaven "in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God and that obey not the gospel."

When this shall be, no man knows, not even the angels in heaven. A three hundred billion dollar debt and rising tyranny may indicate the approaching end of American civilization. It does not necessarily indicate the end of the world. There remains the possibility of a great Protestant Reformation in South America, or the national evangelization of China, ushering in a great era for Christ's Church and a new culture for the world. I have no reason to suppose any such thing will happen, but who can tell? Could it be God's plan that world civilization, starting in the Euphrates valley, should circle the globe and be extinguished when once again it returns to the land of its cradle?

Idle thought, perhaps? But thoughts that prevent rash dogmatism about the future. Let us act, not on guesses, but on knowledge; and this we know: "Ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars ... nation shall rise against nation ... and there shall be famines ... and many false prophets shall rise and deceive many ... and this gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world ..." (Matt. 24:6-14). "Go ye therefore and teach all nations ... and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:19-20).

God moves in a mysterious way

His wonders to perform

He plants his footsteps in the sea

And rides upon the storm.

Blind unbelief is sure to err

And scan his work in vain.

God is his own Interpreter

And he will make it plain.