

THE SOONNESS OF THE SECOND ADVENT

A CONVERSATION

Edward W. H. Vick

Three Christian friends meet to discuss the Advent.

Edward is a conservative who holds fast to the tradition.

William is a sincere but somewhat puzzled believer.

Harry has asked a lot of questions, listened carefully to suggestions and found some answers. Now he shares them.

Then another friend joins them, Susan

E I believe that the Second Advent will be very soon.

W That is the teaching central within the Adventist tradition.

H Let's ask Edward what he means by 'soon.'

E That is not at all difficult. It means 'near,' 'not far off in the future', 'within a short time'.

W. But that puzzles me. I'll tell you why. Those words and phrases simply repeat the problem. They do not explain it. They are synonyms, having the same intention as the original word 'soon'. We then have to say what we mean by 'near', 'not far off' 'short time.'. So we do not explain anything simply by substituting other expressions with the same meaning as the one we are trying to define, or explain.

E. Well for me it means, 'within a few years.'

H I have thought about this. I think that your expression 'within a few years' could also be given a 'nose of wax' to use Luther's expression. Does 'few' mean ten, twenty, a hundred, a thousand? Couldn't you stretch the term 'few' to make it fit a long period of time?

E Well, let's say within a hundred years. That should be safe enough. But I don't think it will be that long.

H. Now you have set a limit. 'Soon' means 'not longer than a hundred years.' I think we are making progress, slowly. You have set a limit to the reference of the term 'soon'. That means that it can now be tested, and that 'Jesus is coming soon' has a definite because defined reference. I.e. 'before 2107. That being the case it can be shown to be true or false. We know what circumstance would show it to be a false claim: The non occurrence of the Advent before 2108.

W I will accept that, but find that the limit is rather long. I think that many Adventists would set it much shorter. But nevertheless we have a limit and so a point of reference for testing our prophetic assertion. The problem, as I see it, is that this departs from the Adventist tradition and present position that Adventists do not set times. Isn't setting a limit really very much like setting a time. 'Within a hundred years' is very like, 'in a hundred years time, or less.' You can specify a date.

H Certainly in one respect it does not leave the term 'soon' vague and airy. It does not give it the 'nose of wax,' so that we can seem to extend it at our pleasure. But I do not find it satisfactory as representing what Adventists would say they believe. They would rather not be so specific, although many would tacitly think that a hundred years was too long a length of time.

W. Suppose we say that 'From this point, now, the Advent will be soon.'

H. That is indeed what a lot of Adventists say. But if you start again from this point, what happens to the original claim made, say a hundred years ago by a former generation? Do you have to forget that they made it then, that if you had been with them, you would have made it then, too?

W. I take the point. What do you see is involved then?

H. Well, you have to reckon that the church made the claim then, and made it very seriously, and since they took it literally, that the Advent would be soon, it has turned out to be false: They made a false claim, a false prediction.

That is to say unless you are going to engage in double talk to say then that 'soon' was understood to mean 'in a few years, but unspecified,' and is now to be understood in the same way

W I think that we do go on using it in much the same way.

H If it meant literally soon then they were wrong. And so was everybody in the decades and centuries before them. You can't go on saying that same thing endlessly.

W But since much time has passed since then are we not now nearer than we were to the Advent?

H That is not the question. We do not know when the Advent will be. So since we cannot even begin to speculate as to how far in the future it will be we cannot say that it will be 'soon'? We may be nearer to a very far off event. But that by no means makes it imminent. 'nearer' does not mean 'soon'.

W But we are nearer than they were in New Testament times.

H of course we are. But that is not the issue. To say we are now nearer does not mean that the advent will be soon. The question we are asking is whether we can make some sense out of the use of the idea of 'soon.' 'Soon' is not a term that is reusable, certainly it is not useable in an infinitely extensible sense. The

alternatives are first to use the term in the unusual way to suggest not far distant but with no limit to be suggested as to when and second to set a limit to the extent of time. in the former case the term ;'soon' is literally with out meaning. in the second case it can be shown to be false or true.

W But it cannot be that the Advent is far, far, off.

H That is to raise another and different question. To get back to the original point. We could not say that the Advent is 'soon' even though we might want to say that we are nearer the Advent than our forbears were. It might still be a far off event.

W Of course, I do not want to be seen as making a false prediction. And I do want to say something meaningful about the Advent.

H Would you be content with saying, 'Jesus is coming again' 'The Kingdom will come.' And pray 'Thy Kingdom come' and not get into insoluble problems by prophesying that the time is very short before the Kingdom comes?

W I'm not sure about that.

E Why are you not sure about it? Let us just go on hoping that the Advent will be soon, pray that it will be in the very near future, indeed believe that it will and let it give us the courage and encouragement we so much need in a hostile or indifferent world.

W I am not sure because I have been listening to a reasonable case about the meaning of the word 'soon' and a reasonable discussion about the significance of what I always thought was a clear assertion that the Advent will be very soon.

E But aren't you being negative?

W. Sorry, but I am not sure that I understand what you mean by saying that.

E I mean that we should see what we can say positively about the future. Then and only then can we have a basis for our hope.

H But that is not true at all, is it. Let's suppose you have two alternatives. One is true and the other is false. So you have to choose between them. So you must affirm one and deny the other. Denying the false alternative is surely the right thing to do. In fact if we allow the apparent paradox, to make such denial is being negative positively. I mean many times a denial is a constructive thing. Surely you do not mean to tell us that being negative is not in many cases constructive You must admit that in many cases far from being destructive it allows us to clear away misunderstanding and confusion. It is far better to be very clear in our negation that to be confused about what we shall believe or affirm as true.

H But there is a far more radical question we have to ask. How can you know whether any claim you make about the trans-terrestrial future is true, that what you expect will happen? Let us take the case of the suicide bomber who believes that he or she will be translated to a happy paradise after dying while

fighting for Allah. If what he or she believes is not true, he or she will never know. To realise the falsity of the claim is impossible. It is also the case with any prediction that takes us beyond the present existence into the trans-cosmic future. The fact is that one will only know whether the hope, the claim for eternal life is true if at the end it takes place. Theologians have called this 'eschatological verification.' If it is false we shall never know. If it is true we cannot know now. We can only know when the event is realised in the transcendent future.

E. But surely we can be certain about the future.

W. Of course you can be certain about the future. But that is no guarantee that what you believe about the future is true and will be shown to be true. Certainty is not knowledge. Certainty is a psychological state. It indicates the strength of our belief. If our certainty is of a false belief then the quicker someone says to you 'You are wrong,' the better. The sooner someone gives me the negative the better. If it is not true that today is Friday, the quicker someone tells me it's Thursday, the better.

E Look who is coming now. Hello Sue!

S. I overheard that. Some people are sure they are right when to all around it is obvious that they are wrong. They do not have to be self-deceived, although that form of irrationality is not at all uncommon. But as you know I am a sceptic. It came gradually. But I am sure that things I am certain about are also both reasonable and true. So I have to ask you people two questions. Why all the attention to the soonness of the Advent, when on your own terms after all what the Advent leads to is the important thing. and the more radical question, Why believe in the Second Advent at all? Prima facie it is a preposterous claim. A man rises from the dead. Is transported from earth to a habitation somewhere in the enormous billions of light years space, is seated (?) as a king and from out such transcendent space returns to earth well you know the story. I need not go on. Analyse each clause in the story and you have your work cut out. A good place to start is with your assumptions. Set them out. List them.

E. But the situation in the clock analogy is different from what it is supposed to be an analogy of.

H. Yes, indeed. That is precisely the whole point. An analogy points to likeness in difference. The likeness is that in both cases we get a prediction of the imminence of an expected event. In the clock analogy the prediction has certainty because it is based upon our acquaintance with what has happened regularly in the past, that is to say, on our repeated experiences of that past. In the case of the prediction of the imminence of the Advent there is no such appeal to past experience, for there has never been such an event, and so there has been nothing previous to it to associate with it so that we can say that in this, future, case, the event will take place very soon. And that makes all the difference.

E. Well after all this, what I must say is that I disagree with you.

H. I have no objection to someone disagreeing with me. What I must ask is that you disagree reasonably. I mean that you give good reasons why you disagree.

This involves your meeting the issues that I have raised point by point and not simply voicing disagreement. I don't think you have done that! What do you say Susie?

S I like to get on well with my good friends. So I don't want to comment about this.

But perhaps there is a more basic issue still! After all for Adventists the Advent is a transition point in human history if and when it happens. So how does one conceive the idea of eternity, and in particular the idea of living in eternity? I must say the mind boggles. I would like to think the ideas attractive, but I cannot.