

## ARTIGOS

### THE DELAY OF THE PAROUSIA IN MODERN INTERPRETATION

**Reinaldo W. Siqueira, Ph.D.**

Professor of Old Testament Exegesis and Theology  
Centro Universitário Adventista, Campus Engenheiro Coelho, Brazil  
reinaldo.siqueira@unasp.edu.br

**ABSTRACT:** The concept of a “delay” of the Parousia has become a common idea in the theological circles that deals with New Testament’s eschatology. It is usually accepted that Jesus and the Early Church expected an imminent coming of God’s kingdom, and its implementation in the midst of humanity in their days. The passing of time, however, brought only disillusion and confusion to the NT believers who tried to cope with such a crisis through the belief in a “delay” of the Parousia. This concept, however, raises in itself a series of complex questions in relation to Jesus, the Bible, and the Christian faith. It is the purpose of this study to approach this issue from the perspective of a “holistic” view of the question, investigating it both from the divine and human perspectives that are presented in the biblical text. This kind of “holistic” approach has been generally forfeited by the theologians that deals with the question.

**KEYWORDS:** Parousia, delay, imminence, Jesus, Apostles, New Testament, Theology.

#### **A TARDANÇA DA PAROUSIA NO DEBATE TEOLÓGICO MODERNO**

**RESUMO:** O conceito de uma “tardança” da Parousia tornou-se uma idéia comum no meio teológico que se dedica ao estudo da escatologia do Novo Testamento. Normalmente se crê que Jesus e a Igreja Primitiva aguardavam a iminente vinda do Reino de Deus e que sua implementação, no seio da humanidade, ocorresse durante os seus próprios dias. O passar do tempo, no entanto, provocou desilusão e confusão entre os crentes do Novo Testamento que tentaram lidar com essa crise através da crença em uma “tardança” da Parousia. Este conceito, no entanto, provoca por si só uma série de complexos questionamentos em relação a Jesus, a Bíblia, e a fé cristã. É propósito desse estudo abordar essa questão a partir de uma perspectiva “holística,” investigando o problema tanto da perspectiva dos fatores divinos e humanos a ele relacionados no texto bíblico. Esse tipo de abordagem “holística” tem sido geralmente negligenciado pelos teólogos que se têm dedicado à questão.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Parousia, tardança, iminência, Jesus, apóstolos, Novo Testamento, teologia.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The concept of the “delay” of the Parousia is a pretty well established idea in modern Christian theology (cf. Smalley, 1964, p. 41-54; Taylor, 1999, p. 40-42). Most scholars maintain the point of view that the NT writers, in general, as well as the Early Christians, expected that an imminent, visible return of Christ would occur at any time after his ascension to heavens. However, with the passing of time such a hope resulted into a crisis in the Early Church which was answered by a shift from this imminent expectation to a belief in a delayed Parousia (Käsemann, 1964, p. 170). Finally, the centuries that followed the Early Church Era saw a complete eclipse of the belief in the Parousia and of the eschatological hope of the kingdom of God and their replacement by ecclesiology (cf. McArthur, 1962, p. 658-661).

However, as Gallagher (1982, p. 363-365) observed, the implications of this theory can be quite heavy. The concept of a “delay” of the Parousia often carries within it a negative idea, as if a mistake had occurred, an error was done, a failure had happened. Such a notion led some theologians to speak about the misguided belief of Jesus and of the Early Church concerning an



imminent Parousia (Schweitzer, 1968, p. 123-125, 137-139; Taylor, 1999, p. 34-36). Reacting against such a negative notion, some scholars defend that Jesus never believed in a imminent Parousia (Dodd, 1952, p. 101-110); while others maintain that the "delay" concept is more of a problem for modern scholarship than it was for the Early Church (Morris, 1973, p. 126), and so on.

So the concept of a "delay" raises questions concerning Jesus. Did he really know what he was talking about? Was he right? Was he wrong? Was he really what he taught to be? It also raises questions concerning the sayings of Jesus. Were they really his own or the Church's, or the Redactor's? It raises questions about the nature of the NT. Was it inspired or was it the fruit of human experience and genius, the result of some men religious deceptions and struggles, and the reformulation of their previous ideas? It even raises questions concerning God, the God depicted in the NT, and in the Bible<sup>1</sup>. Is He really omniscient, omnipotent? Is God really like the way the NT, or the Bible depicts Him?

Therefore, to have a good perception of the so called "delay" of the Parousia and its theology is not an issue of minor importance for the understanding of the Bible and its message. It is the purpose of this paper to inquiry into this question in view of a better understand of the matter.

This study will first present a synthetic overview of the main texts in the NT which deal with the question of the "delay". Then, it will briefly survey the major different approaches to these texts in modern theology. A special attention will be given to the way the question has been treated in the Seventh-day Adventist context. In a third moment, a brief critical analysis will be presented to each approaches covered in the previous section. Finally, there will be an essay of an answer concerning the questions raised by the concept of the "delay" of the Parousia. Since it will not be able to cover all the questions that may rise from such an important issue (and some of them were just presented above), this paper will concern itself with the basic question of the relevance of the hope in the Parousia for Christians today. It will try to address this problem by focusing in the three basic issues that seems to be central to this issue: the questions of time, imminence, and delay.

## 1. THE "DELAY" OF THE PAROUSIA IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the sequence, the main texts of the NT in which it has been attested the motif of the "delay" of the Parousia are presented (cf. Bauckham, 1980, p. 19-36; Gaventa, 1982, p. 27-42; and Holman, 1982, p. 168-383).

### 1.1. THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS AND ACTS

In the Synoptic Gospels, the theme of the "delay" of the Parousia appears chiefly in the Synoptic Apocalypses (Mt 24:1-35, Mk 13:1-31 and Lk 21:5-36) and in the "watch" parables ( Mt 24:36-51; 25:1-30; Mk 13:32-36; Lk 12:35-48).

In the Synoptic Apocalypses, after warning the disciple against being deceived by those who claim be the Christ and say "the *time is near*" (Lk 21:8)<sup>3</sup>, Jesus said:

"You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, *but the end is still to come*" (Mt 24:6).

"When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, *but the end is still to come*" (Mk 13:7).

"When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things *must happen first, but the end will not come right away*" (Lk 21:9).

He then spoke about a time of animosity among the nations, famine, pestilences and earthquakes. In that time, Christ's followers would be persecuted and betrayed by all ( Mt 24:9,10; Mk 13:9,11,12; Lk 21:12-18). This sayings clearly present a time of trouble that *will precede* the end. It is this difficult time that would be imminent in the believers nearby future and not the Parousia. In view of that, Christ exhorted his disciples to stand firm, to endure to the end ( Mt 24:13; Mk 13:13; Lk 21:19 - Luke however does not have the temporal clause "to the end"). This



time, which precedes the Parousia, would be long enough to allow the Gospel to be preached to all the nations, in accordance to Matthew and Mark as follow:

And this gospel of the kingdom *will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations , and then the end will come*" (Mt 24:14).

And the gospel *must first be preached to all the nations* (Mk 13:10).

In the sequence of the Synoptic Apocalypses, Jesus spoke about the destruction of Jerusalem (Mt 24:15-20; Mk 13:14-18; Lk 21:20-23), then about a time of great tribulation and affliction which Matthew presents as being posterior to the destruction of Jerusalem (see Holman, 1982, p. 277-279, for the use of the adverb *tóte* in the Greek text as carrying an idea of consequence or subsequence in time and action). It is only after this time of great tribulation that the Parousia would take place:

*Immediately after the distress of those days* the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. *At that time* the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. (Mt 24:29,30)

*But in those days, following that distress*, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. *At that time* men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. (Mk 13:24-26)

... Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles *until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled* . There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth , nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. *At that time* they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. (Lk 21:24-27)

The idea of the "delay" appears also in the "watch" parables. In the Synoptic text, these parables are preceded by the assertion that no one knows the day and the hour of Christ's second coming but only the Father, therefore there is a need to "watch" and be ready (Mt 24:42-44; Mk 13:33-37; Lk 12:35-40; 21:34-36). While Mark stresses only on the need to be ready, to be watchful, for the Parousia can occur any time – an emphasis that goes with the line of an imminent expectation; the text of Matthew and Luke presents also a "delay" element in these parables. In the parable of the faithful and the wicked servants (Mt 24:45-51; Lk 12:42-48), while the faithful servant, who was put in charge of the household while his master goes in travel, does whatever is needed faithfully until the return of the master, the wicked says to himself:

*My master is staying away a long time* (Mt 24: 48 ).

*My master is taking a long time in coming* (Lk 12: 45).

He starts then to beat his fellow servants, eat and drink until to the point of getting drunk. But on a day the wicked servant does not expect his master comes and punishes him severely. That parable seems to be a rebuke to the members of the Early Church who would be tempted to have the same attitude of the wicked servant in face of the "delay" of Christ's Coming (see Lk 12:45 in Nolland, 1993; and Mt 24:48 in Hagner, 1995) .

Only the Gospel of Matthew has then the "Parable of the Ten Virgins"<sup>2</sup> (Mt 25:1-13). These virgins went out to meet the bridegroom, but they all became drowsy and fell asleep because "the bridegroom was *a long time in coming*" (Mt 25:5). When the bridegroom finally came, only those virgins who thought it could be a "delay" went with him to the wedding banquet, while the others who expected an imminent coming where rebuked and did not get in. The



exhortation is then to "keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour" (Mt 25:13). So it seems that here Christians who only expected an imminent coming were rebuked, while those who have made room for a possible "delay" of the Parousia were praised.

Both the Gospel of Matthew and Luke have the "Parable of the Talents" or "of the Ten Minas" (Mt 25:14-30; Lk 19:12-27) that speaks of a man, or a noble, who went on a journey and entrusted his property to three servants. The two first worked with the portion they got, while the third one hid his part. The issue of the "delay" appears in Matthew by the end of the parable:

"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them" (Mt 25:19).

In Luke, it seems to be referred in the beginning of the parable as it is written:

"A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return" (Lk 19: 12).

When the master settles accounts with his servants, he praises those who worked diligently with the amount they got to the point of doubling it, but he rebukes the one who did nothing while waiting for his return (Mt 25:20-30; Lk 19:15-26).

These texts of the Synoptic Apocalypses and of the "watch" parables are commonly considered as evidences of the shift in the Early Church from an expectation for an imminent Parousia (indicated in passages such as Mt 24:34, Mk 13:30, and Lk 21:32 that speak of the Parousia as an event that would take place in "this generation") to the teaching of a delayed Parousia which would be preceded by a certain indefinite time.

In book of Acts, the theme of the "delay" of the Parousia seems to be evidence in the fact that the book shows little concern with eschatology. While the first two chapters of Acts have a strong eschatological tone (cf. Ac 1:3, 6, 11; 2:17-21) this tone seems to cease from chapter 3 onwards. Indeed, Luke seems to be more concerned in Acts with writing the history of the Christian religion as a secular history, fact that for theologians as Käsemann (1969, p. 21) "only becomes possible where primitive Christian eschatology, the dynamic force of New Testament preaching, is in eclipse", for "you do not write the history of the Church, if you are expecting the end of the world to come any day" (Käsemann, 1964, p. 28).

## 1.2. The letters of Paul

Almost every letter of Paul speaks about the Parousia.<sup>4</sup> Some of his passage seems to point to an imminent expectation of the Parousia, such as 1Th 4:15-17:

According to the Lord own word, we tell you that *we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord*, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, *we who are still alive and are left* will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

Many scholars consider that Paul expected the Parousia in his lifetime, since he included himself and his readers among those who would be alive in the Second Coming (Bruce, 1982, 99, 105). However, Paul's expectation for the imminence of the Parousia seems to have been lessened in his later letters. This "shifting" in Paul's expectations would be evidenced by passages such as in 2 Thessalonians, Philippians and 2 Timothy:

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you brothers, not to become unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, *for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed*, the man doomed to destruction." (2Th 2:1-3)



"I am torn between the two: *I desire to depart and be with Christ* which is better by far" (Php 1:23).

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, *and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day* –and not only to me, but also *to all who have longed for his appearing.* (2Ti 4:7, 8)

In 2 Thessalonians Paul speaks about a time of rebellion before the Parousia so that the Christians in Thessalonica should not expect for an imminent Parousia. In Philippians, Paul does not seem to expect to be alive anymore during Parousia. In 2 Timothy, he expects the Parousia in the future without making any reference to time. Therefore, some conclude that his imminent expectation became a hope in the Parousia but no connection with a time schedule anymore. This fact would be indicated by itself Paul's shift from an imminent to delayed Parousia (McArthur, 1962, p. 659-660; Bruce, 1982, p. 105).

### 1.3. The Johannine Literature

In writings of John, the great emphasis on the Parousia appears in Revelation chapters 1-3 and 19-22. Many times, in these chapters, the imminence of the event is highlighted (Rev 1:1, 3; 2:16, 25; 3:3, 11; 22: 7, 10-12, 20). In his gospel, references to the Parousia appear in chapter 5:27-29; 6:39-40, 44, 54; 14:3; 12:48; 21:22-23; and in his letters, it appears in passages such as 1 John 2: 28 and 3: 2.

While in Revelation, an expectation for an imminent coming of Christ is stressed by the passages indicated above, the theme of the delay appears in the martyrs' cry "*how long?*", and in the answer given to this question: "*they were told to wait a little longer*" (Rev 6:10). For Bauckham (1980, p. 29-36) the motif of the "delay" is worked out in the very structure of Rev. 6-11. The audience in the time of John would identify the "delay" motif first in the series of seven movements expressed by the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls (Rev 6:1-8:1; 8:6-11:19; 16); and second, by the long parenthesis (Rev 7: 10; and 11:1-13) inserted between the sixth seal and trumpet (where the Parousia is imminent) and the seventh seal and trumpet which deals with the very event of the Parousia. These textual "evidences" in the book of Revelation would also testify about a shift from an expectation of an imminent Parousia to a delayed one.

### 1.4. Other NT books

The expectation for an imminent Parousia seems to be reflected in other NT passages like James 5:7-9, where it is written that "*the Lord's coming is near*"; in 1 Peter 1:7,13; 4: 7,13, where it is stated that "*the end of all things is near*" ( 1Pe 4: 7 ); or in Jude 6, 21. However, an emphasis on the "delay" of the Parousia seems to be the subject of 2 Peter 3: 3-10, where it is written:

First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "*Where is this 'coming' he promised?* Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation... .. But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* But the day of the Lord will come like a thief...

This passage of 2 Peter seems to clearly present the crisis which occurred in the Early Church when the time passed by. The generation that received the apostles' message was dying and the Lord had not come. Some members started to doubt the Lord's promise, and apostasy followed. Peter appears to be facing the problem by trying to provide an answer to the dilemma of the "delay" (Bauckham, 1980, p. 19-28).

By the testimony of these diverse sections of the NT, many scholars concluded that the Early Church faced the problem of the "delay" of the Parousia, and that there was a shift from an



imminent expectation to a delayed one. However, if this reality of the early christian experience is accepted by almost the majority of the theologians (cf. McArthur, 1962, p. 660-661; and Rowland, 1992, p. 168-169), the interpretation of it differs widely among them. These different interpretations are exactly the subject of the next section.

## 2. THE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE DELAY

Modern theology has six major trends of eschatological interpretation (Ladd, 1982, p. 130-131; see also Aune, 1992, p. 599-600): 1) The "Consistent (also called 'Unrealized' or 'Consequent') Eschatology"; 2) the "Realized Eschatology"; 3) the "Existentialism"; 4) the "Timeless Eschatology"; 5) the "Moderate (also called 'Proleptic') Eschatology"; and 6) the "Orthodoxism". Each trend approaches the question of the "delay" from a different perspective. In the sequence, their majors representatives will be surveyed with their respective answers to the problem of the "delay" of The Parousia.

### 2.1. THE "CONSISTENT ESCHATOLOGY"

The "Consistent Eschatology" was introduced by Albert Schweitzer who interpreted Jesus as a Jewish apocalyptic preacher whose entire mission was centered in the belief of an imminent end of the world and the coming of the kingdom of God. For Schweitzer, Jesus died in disillusionment because the end did not come. However, Paul and the Early Church believed that with the death and resurrection of Jesus the messianic age had begun and that the eschatological blessings could be actually experienced. It initiated then a process of "de-eschatologising" by the removal of future hopes and their replacement by present ethical motivation (cf. Ladd, 1982, p. 131; for a detailed presentation of the "Consistent Eschatology" views see the discussion in one of its tenant Werner, 1957, p. 40-115).

Albert Schweitzer was the first to formulate the concept of "the delay of the Parousia" (Hoekema, 1979, p. 111), and with him started the whole discussion about the *role* of the "delay" in Early Christianity and in the Christianity.

According to Schweitzer, when Jesus sent his twelve disciples to preach to the lost sheep of Israel that "the kingdom of heaven is near" (Mt 10:5-42), he was expecting that the Kingdom would come before they had finished their task. In this occasion, Jesus stated to his disciples: "I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel *before* the Son of Man comes" (Mt 10:23). Commenting on this episode, Schweitzer wrote:

To how an extent this was the case in regard to the mission of the Twelve is clearly seen from the "charge" which Jesus gave them. He tells them in plain words (Matt. x. 23), that He does not expect to see them back in the present age. The Parousia of the Son of Man, which is logically and temporally identical with the dawn of the kingdom, *will take place before they shall have completed* a hasty journey through the cities of Israel to announce it... It is equally clear, and here the dogmatic considerations which guided the resolutions of Jesus become still more prominent, that this prediction *was not fulfilled*. The disciples returned to Him; and the appearing of the Son of Man had not taken place... [italics supplied] (Schweitzer, 1950a, p. 358, 359).

This was the first "delay of the Parousia". It provoked an alteration in Jesus' plans, after that he started to believe that he must bring in the Kingdom by his own suffering and death (ibid., p. 359, 360). For Schweitzer:

In order to understand Jesus' resolve to suffer, we must first recognize that the mystery of this suffering is involved in the mystery of the Kingdom of God, since the Kingdom cannot come until the *peirasmós* has taken place... The 'must be' of the sufferings is the same – the coming of the Kingdom, and the Parousia, which are dependent upon the *peirasmós* having first taken place. (Schweitzer, 1950b, p. 387).

Jesus then died as an disillusioned man, without revealing his understanding of the meaning of his death to the disciples. Schweitzer sustained that "Jesus carried with him to the



grave the secret of the Passion which was to be revealed to the inheritors of the Kingdom at its coming. But the Kingdom did not come" (Schweitzer, 1950a, p. 152), and "since the Kingdom had not arrived and the original causal connection [Jesus' hope that his death would bring the Kingdom] was dissolved with the temporal" there was there another "delay" (ibid., p. 153).

For Schweitzer, the "delay" of the Parousia is the most influential factor in the shaping of Christianity, since its very beginning, as he explains:

The whole history of 'Christianity' down to the present, that is to say, the real inner history of it, *is based on the delay of the Parousia, the non-occurrence of the Parousia, the abandonment of eschatology, the progress and completion of the "de-eschatologising"* of religion which has been connected therewith. [italics supplied] (Schweitzer, 1950b, p. 360).

Therefore, for him the "delay" of the Parousia is associated a mistaken hope that misquided Jesus and the early christians who expected the coming of the kingdom, the Parousia. Both hope for the Parousia and the "delay" explanations found in the NT and Early Christianity must be understood as a temporal garb that must be discarded, and that was indeed was by Christianity in the following centuries. Therefore, the "delay" of the Parousia does not constitute a problem for the "Consistent Eschatology," for even to speak about it today is a nonsense, as Schwietzer observed:

...The expectation of the Kingdom which would come of itself was not to find actual fulfillment. For centuries Christianity looked for it in vain. It could not easily come to terms with the fact. It had to try to understand what could be learned from it. When it applied itself to the interpretation of the signs of the times, it could understand them only as meaning that it is called up to renounce its old ideas and learn anew. The task was laid upon it of giving up its belief in the Kingdom which would come of itself and giving its devotion to the Kingdom which must be made real.

... In the thought of Paul the supernatural Kingdom is beginning to become the ethical and with this to change from the Kingdom to be expected into something which has to be realized. It is for us to take the road which this prospect opens up. (Schweitzer, 1968, p. 183).

## 2.2. THE "REALIZED ESCHATOLOGY"

For the theologians of the "Realized Eschatology," the Kingdom of God *has come* in the person and mission of Jesus. While Jesus in some sayings speaks of the Kingdom of God as future, and in other as present, his great and distinctive emphasis was in the actual presence of that kingdom among men. The apocalyptic language he sometimes used was only a symbolic representation of that which stands beyond history - the absolute, the "wholly other," which in his person has entered into time and space. It was the Early Church that, by misinterpreting Jesus' "realized eschatology," read back Jesus' words and reinterpreted them under the light of the Jewish eschatology. They introduced the issues of a future Parousia, and of a "delayed" Parousia into most of the NT. Only the Gospel of John and the Book of Hebrews retained Jesus' original teachings on a "realized eschatology" (Ladd, 1982, p. 131; Aune, 1992, p. 599-600).

C. H. Dodd was the first defender of the ideas of the "Realized Eschatology" trend. By strongly reacting against Schweitzer's theory of the "Consistent Eschatology," he proposed that in Jesus "the *eschaton* has moved from the future to the present, from the sphere of expectation into that of realized experience" (Dodd, 1957, p. 50). Concerning Jesus' perspective on the Kingdom of God, he wrote:

But Jesus declares that this ultimate, the Kingdom of God, has come into history, and He takes upon Himself the 'eschatological' role of 'Son of Man.' The absolute, the 'wholly other,' has entered into time and space. And *the Kingdom of God has come and the Son of Man has come, so also judgement and blessedness have come into human*



*experience.* The ancient images of the heavenly feast, of Doomsday, of the Son of Man at the right hand of power, are not symbols of the supra-sensible, supra-historical realities; they have also their corresponding actuality within history. Thus both the facts of the life of Jesus, and the events which He foretells within the historical order, are 'eschatological' events, for they fall within the coming of the Kingdom of God. The historical order however cannot contain the whole meaning of the absolute. The imagery therefore retains its significance as symbolizing the eternal realities, which though they enter into history are never exhausted. The Son of Man has come, but also He will come; the sin of men is judged, but also it will be judged.

But these future tenses are only an accommodation of language. *There is no coming of the Son of Man 'after' His coming in Galilee and Jerusalem, whether soon or late, for there is no before or after in the eternal order.* The Kingdom of God in its full reality is not something which will happen after other things have happened. It is that to which men awake when this order of time and space no longer limits their vision, when they 'sit at meat in the Kingdom of God' with all the blessed dead, and drink with Christ the 'new wine' of eternal felicity. 'The Day of the Son of Man' stands for the timeless fact. [italics supplied] (ibid., p. 107-108)

For Dodd, the view of Jesus and of the Early Church's, immediately after Jesus' life on earth, was that they were living in "the age of fulfillment" (ibid., p. 132). The apostles, however, expected the end of the "crisis" in the shortest time possible, by the coming of the End. But, as months and years went by and everything remained as before, the question rose "where was the promise of His coming on the clouds of heaven?" Dodd stated that:

In the course of time the better minds of the Church, under the guidance of such teachers as Paul and the author of the Fourth Gospel, arrived at an interpretation which did justice to the deeper meaning of Jesus. But meanwhile those who took his words literally built up a new Christian eschatology on the lines of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition.

The result of this development was that the original unity and continuity of the eschatological process was broken up. This is the profound and significant difference between the outlook of the sayings of Jesus and that of the formed tradition of His teaching as it entered into our written Gospels. *The sayings were uttered in and for a brief period of intense crisis: the tradition was formed in a period of stable and growing corporate life, conceived as the interval between two crisis, one past, the other yet to come.* [italics supplied] (ibid., 133,134).

Therefore, the "delay" of the Parousia is a relecture of Jesus' words influenced by Jewish apocalypticism, in order to give to the Early Church, which was so influenced by the Jewish eschatology, a reason for the "delay". For Christianity today, the "Realized Eschatology" see no motif for speaking of a "delay" of the Parousia, for the coming of Christ is always present through the ongoing spiritual relationship present in conversion, baptism, meditation and death (ibid., p. 108). Dodd affirmed:

...But we have warrant to affirming that God comes to meet us in history, and sets before us the open but narrow door of His Kingdom. To accept His Kingdom and enter in brings blessedness, because the best conceivable thing is that we should be in obedience to the will of God. Such blessedness may be enjoyed here and now, but it is never exhausted in any experience that falls within the bounds of time and space. Our destiny lies in the eternal order... (ibid., p. 209, 210; for another expositor of the "Realized Eschatology" ideas see Glasson, 1963, p. 116-167).

### 2.3. THE "EXISTENTIALISM"

In the "Existentialism," eschatology is mythology and it is alien to the modern world view. Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet, but his eschatological perspective was only a reflex of his intense God-consciousness. In face of such kind of God-consciousness the world falls away and





seems be at its end. When a person is confronted by the demands of God, he who answers positively enters into an eschatological existence. He comes to the end of his old life –he is free from his past; and he enters into a new life –he is open to the future (Ladd, 1982, p. 131). As representative of the "existentialism", this study will try to survey briefly the view of Rudolf Bultmann.

Rudolf Bultmann is the foremost representative of the perspectives of "Existentialism" in rapport to the NT. For him, the "early Christian community understands itself not as a historical but as an eschatological phenomenon", "the *new people of God* has no real history, for it is the community of the end-time" (Bultmann, 1957, p. 37, 36). Such consciousness however was tread by the lengthening of time. The expected coming of Christ failed to take place and disappointment and doubt were rising. 2 Peter 3: 5-10 represents an essay of answer to those problems. However, "such answer could not provide a solution of the problem for any length of time" (ibid., 37). For Bultmann:

The problem of Eschatology grew out of the fact that the expected end world failed to arrive, that the 'Son of Man' did not appear in the clouds of heaven, that history went on, and the eschatological community could not fail to recognize that it had become a historical phenomenon and that the Christian faith had taken on the shape of a new religion. This is made clear by two facts: (a) the historiography of the author of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles (b) the importance which tradition gained in the Christian community. (Ibid., p. 38).

The Parousia was then moved to the indefinite future. Christians became used to waiting, and finally the eschatological hope was replaced by the sacramentalism, and the "delay" was not a problem anymore (ibid., p. 51). Bultmann urges, however, our present need of re-interpreting such forms of ancient belief in order to make it relevant for today. For him, the hope in the Parousia is an expression of an existential relationship with God, a symbol of the moment of decision, to be ready for the future that God has to every one of us, as he states:

... this hope or this faith can be called readiness for the unknown future that God will give. In brief, it means to be open to God's future in the face of death and darkness.

... to be open to God's future which is really imminent to every one of us; to be prepared for this future which can come as a thief in the night when we do not expect it; to be prepared for this future will be a judgement on all men who have found themselves to this world and are not free, not open to God's future. (Bultmann, 1958, p. 31, 32).

For Bultmann, every instant of history "has the possibility of being an eschatological instant and in christian faith this possibility is realized" (Bultmann, 1957, 154).

For today, in "Existentialism," there is no question of a "delay" of the Parousia, for the Parousia is part of the existential *now*, the decision point in relating to God, as Bultmann makes plain:

... According to the New Testament, *Jesus Christ is the eschatological event*, the action of God by which God has set up an end to the old world. In the preaching of the Christian Church the eschatological event will ever again become present and does become present ever and again in faith. The old world has reached its end for the believer, he is 'a new creature in Christ'. For the old world has reached its end with the fact that he himself as 'the old man' has reached his end and is now 'a new man', a free man. (Ibid., 151).

#### 2.4. THE "TIMELESS ESCHATOLOGY"

The "Timeless Eschatology" has its founder in Karl Barth. In such view, the eschatological event is not a future event but a eternal present in which God is forever coming to meet man. It has a vertical dimension, rather than horizontal. God's eschatological kingdom stands above man and his time, rather than ahead in the future (Gallagher, 1982, p. 325, 326). "The Parousia is no longer understood as the future return of Christ but rather as 'a timeless symbol for the endless



earnestness of eternity in every existential situation" (Hoekema, 1979, p. 307, 308). Writing on Romans 13:11, Barth commented the following concerning the "delay" of the Parousia:

... It is not time but Eternity that lies 'beyond'. Standing on the boundary of time, men are confronted by the overhanging, precipitous wall of God, by which all time and everything that is in time are dissolved. There it is that they await the Last Hour, the Parousia of Jesus Christ. But the Day and the Hour no man knoweth.... Do not our ears burn when we hear this? Will there never be an end of all our ceaseless talk about the *delay* of the Parousia? How can the coming of that doth not *enter in* ever be *delayed*? The End of which the New Testament speaks is *no temporal event, no legendary 'destruction' of the world; it has nothing to do with any historical, or 'telluric', or cosmic catastrophe* [italics supplied]. The end of which the New Testament speaks is really the End; so utterly the End, that in measure of nearness or distance our nineteen hundred years are not merely of little, but of no importance; so utterly the End that Abraham already saw the Day - and was glad.... What *delays* its coming is not the Parousia, but our awakening.... But rather, knowing that the eternal 'Moment' does not, has not, and will not, *enter in*, we should then become aware of the dignity and the importance of each single concrete temporal moment, and apprehend its qualification and its ethical demand. Then we should await the Parousia: we should, that is to say, accept our present conditioning its full seriousness; we should apprehend Jesus Christ as the Author and the Finisher; and then we should not to hesitate to repent, to be converted, to think the thought of eternity, and therefore to-love. (Barth, 1933, p. 500-501).

Therefore there is not such a thing as a "delay" of the Parousia, as commonly understood, for there will be nothing of a such cosmic end, a cosmic Parousia. If is there a "delay", this is the result of our poor or missing awakens. If we do awake in any "single concrete temporal moment" (that means "accept our present condition", "apprehend Jesus Christ as the Author and the Finisher", "to repent", "to be converted", "to think the thought of eternity", "to love" ) the Parousia will take place. In the "timeless eschatology" there is no reason for speaking of a "delay" of the Parousia for here, as in the "Existentialism," the important factor is the "now," as Barth explains it:

...whether we wish it or not, we do stand at every moment on the frontier of time; did we, standing in the frontier, dare to love the Unknown, to apprehend and lay hold of the Beginning in the End...

... Far too *nigh at hand* is the Kingdom of God, far too *near* is the overhanging wall of eternity - in every stone and flower, in every human face! - far too oppressive is the boundary of time - memento mori! - far too insistent and compelling is the presence of Christ as the turning-point of time. The direct and concrete movement of life, governed as it is by BIOS and EROS and PATHOS, cannot remain undisturbed. Indeed, it has already been disturbed. The form of this world passeth away, and the Kingdom of God cometh. Love, and all that proceeds from love, demonstrates this passing away and this coming. (ibid., p. 501).

## 2.5. THE "MODERATE ESCHATOLOGY"

The "Moderate Eschatology" recognizes that there is truth in both "Consistent" and "Realized" eschatology. In one hand, the hope of the OT is in some real sense fulfilled in the person and mission of Jesus, but in the other hand the consummation of hope waits for an eschatological consummation (Ladd, 1982, 131; Aune, 1992, p. 600). Many modern theologians adopted the views of the "Moderate Eschatology" trend, such as Werner G. Kümmel (1957), Oscar Cullman (1964), Wolfhart Pannenberg (1968), and others.

Kümmel, i.e., accepts that Jesus expected an imminent Parousia. However, he explains this expectation as being merely a contemporary way of expressing the definite and certain nature of the Parousia (Kümmel, 1957, p. 152,153). Jesus did mistake when he emphasized the imminence of the Parousia. However, the idea of imminence did not receive much emphasis in Jesus' message, as Kümmel explains:



... Jesus does not proclaim in quite general terms the future coming of the Kingdom of God, but also its *imminence*. What is more: on the one hand he emphasized this so concretely that he limited it to the lifetime of his hearer's generation; yet on the other hand he only expected a *part* of them to live to experience this eschatological event; so he did not wish to limit its proximity too closely. It is very clear that this prediction of Jesus was not realized and it is therefore impossible to assert that Jesus was not mistaken about this. On the contrary it must be unreservedly admitted that Jesus' eschatological message remained confined at least in this respect to a form conditioned by time, which proved untenable owing to developments after the beginning of Christianity. Now the significance of what has just been established must certainly not be overrated. For the number of texts which place a definite limit to the imminent expectation (Matt. 10.23; Mark 9.1; 13.30) is extraordinarily small and it is correct to conclude from this fact that this idea did not receive much emphasis in Jesus' message. (Ibid., p. 149, 150).

For Kümmel, concepts such as imminence and "delay" are secondary, for the eschatological event does not depend of an "end of the world as such, but in the fact that the approaching eschatological consummation will allow the Kingdom of *that* God to become a reality which has already in the present allowed his redemptive purpose to be realized in Jesus" (ibid., p. 154). Kümmel does not see a need to give an "eschatological" significance for the present, and thereby speak about "delay" or imminence; rather, the meaning of the eschatological message lies in just this: that in Jesus the Kingdom of God came into being and in him it will be consummated (ibid., p. 155).

Hence, the "delay" of the Parousia is not a problem for the "Moderate Eschatology." The lapse of time does not constitute in itself a problem that would lead a Christian to forsake the hope in the coming kingdom of God, for it was made sure already in Jesus. Indeed Kümmel explains:

...for the believer the question is not whether he will accept the correctness of the apocalyptic prediction or of an interpretation referring to the present of that which relates to the beyond, but whether he will respond to the divine mission of *that* Jesus who could promise us the reign of God, because it was already fulfilled in him. The Christian can assent to this question with complete confidence only because he knows of God's action in raising the one who was crucified and in founding his Church through the gift of the Spirit which lies beyond the earthly activity of Jesus. But the Christian knows also that the possibility of a such a faith is bound up with the reality of the Jesus in whom God brought his salvation to fulfillment in history and through whom God authoritatively promised his approaching consummation of history. (ibid.)

## 2. 6. THE "ORTHODOXISM"

The "Orthodoxism" is mainly represented by conservative Protestantism. However, its perspectives are very differentiated from a conservative protestant group to another. As representatives of the major orthodox approaches this paper will briefly cover: first, the dispensationalistic view, taking as a representative John F. Walvoord; second, the classical evangelical view, through Anthony A. Hoekema; and finally, the Seventh-Day Adventist view.

### 2.6.1. THE DISPENSATIONALISM

In John F. Walvoord's view, the time of the Parousia has a double aspect: The first one is its imminence, expressed through the secret rapture of the Church before the time of tribulation. Speaking about the imminence of the coming of the Lord through the secret rapture, he wrote:

... It is because it is a moment-by-moment expectation that the believer is exhorted to holiness. It is as if a distinguished guest were expected at any moment. Everything must be in order and spotless. There will be no time of preparation when he comes. Not only is there the customary cleaning; but as the moments of waiting continue there is the constant reinspection to be sure that all is in order. If it were known that the guest would not arrive for days or months or years, there would be no need of vigilance. It is the



*imminence* of his coming that determines the urgency of preparation. (Walvoord, 1975, p. 56, 57).

Such imminence was the hope of the Early Church, it has been the expectation of each generation of Christians. There was no mistake in the apostles prediction about the imminence of the Parousia and this was not a naive hope, but it is the very expression of the faithful christian hope (ibid., p. 48).

The second aspect is that the Parousia will occur at a fixed time, after the 7 last years of the seventy weeks prophecy of Daniel 9. At that time, the Lord will come to establish his kingdom on earth, as he explains: "... The "end" of which Daniel 9:27 speaks can only be the return of Christ to bring righteousness, peace, prosperity, and universal knowledge of God to this evil world" (ibid., p. 78).

Therefore, with such double approach, he sees two future comings of Christ (ibid., p. 87, 88). The concept of a "delay" of the Parousia has no place in the thinking of Walvoord, for, in that which concerns the time of the Parousia, in one hand it is imminent with the Translation through the secret rapture; and in the other hand, it is a fixed prophetic time in what concerns the final coming.

#### **2.6.2. CLASSICAL EVANGELICAL VIEW ( ANTHONY A. HOEKEMA )**

Anthony Hoekema sees a need for the Church today of the same spirit of "lively expectation of Christ's return" that characterized the life and the belief of the Early Church (Hoekema, 1979, p. 110). For him, "if this expectation is no longer present, there is something radically wrong. It is the unfaithful servant in Jesus parable who says in his heart, 'My lord delays his coming'" (ibid.). And he continues:

... Whatever the reasons may be, the loss of a lively, vital anticipation of the Second Coming of Christ is a sign of a most serious spiritual malady in the church. Though there may be differences between us on various aspects of eschatology, all Christians should eagerly look forward to Christ's return, and should live in the light of that expectation every day anew. (Ibid., p. 110, 111).

Concerning the "delay" of the Parousia, Hoekema (ibid., p. 122) wrote that in the Synoptic Gospel: First, Jesus did not set a date for his return (Mt 24: 36; Mk 13: 32), therefore one can note speak about a "error in perspective" on his part. Second, "Jesus did, however, teach that within the lifetime of his hearers he would come in kingly glory (Mt 16:28); these words referred to his resurrection, which would be a prelude to and a guarantee of his Parousia. Jesus therefore taught the certainty of his Parousia, without giving us its exact date". Third, some of the sayings of Jesus leave room for a considerable amount of time before his return. Fourth, since the date is unknown there is need of constant watchfulness, which is not idle waiting but diligent use of our gifts in the service of Christ's kingdom.

For Hoekema, all the dimensions above need to be considered together for a whole picture of the issue; to neglect one or another is a "gross oversimplification" (ibid., p. 112).

About Paul's eschatological perspective he says that:

.. It seems quite evident that Paul did indeed expect Christ to return very soon. In fact, it seems reasonable to believe that Paul himself hoped still to be living at that time. But that does not mean that Paul left room for no other possibility, nor that he set a "within-this-generation" date for the Parousia as a part of his authoritative teaching. Paul was not interested in date-setting; his great interest was teaching the certainty of Christ's return, and the importance of being always ready for that return. To say Paul hoped still to be alive at the Parousia is one thing; but to say that he definitely taught that the Parousia would occur before his death is quite another thing. (ibid., p. 124).

On 2Pe 3:3-4, he observed that were the scoffers who spoke of a delay. So the "delay" of the Parousia is not a question raised by the anxious believer but by mockers who were attempting to discredit God's Word. Peter's answer shows that the so called "delay" by the mockers "is not a



stalling off the return of Christ, as if he has forgotten his promise, but is deliberated waiting in order the better to reveal his love, his compassion, and his forbearance toward sinners" (ibid., p. 127). Therefore, he concluded that instead of speaking about a "delay," "we should thank God for this manifestation of his love, and be all the more diligent to bring the gospel to those who may not yet have heard it" (ibid.).

Therefore, for Hoekema, the concept of the "delay" of the Parousia as maintained by many NT scholars, with its co-related idea of Jesus and the Early Church's mistaken belief in a soon Parousia, is not found in the teaching of Bible when it is correctly understood (ibid., p. 126, 127).

### 2.6.3. THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST INTERPRETATION

Roy Branson, in his article "Responding to the Delay," presents that are three Seventh-Day Adventist responses to the question of the "delay" of the Parousia: the expansionist, the moral and the cosmic responses (Branson, 1986, p. 8-17). Since the two first responses have many points in common and both emphasize the human side of the problem, this study will reorganize this tripartite division and reclassify them as: first, those who emphasize the human aspect of the problem; second, those who emphasize the divine aspect of the question; and finally, those who emphasize that there is no "delay" at all.

(1) The human aspect – this group could be divided into three subgroups:

The first one stresses the need for the spreading of the Gospel to every nation and people of the world. The main biblical support for that position is Mt 24: 14: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come". The "delay" of the Parousia therefore depend on the preaching the Gospel, for only when the Church will accomplish such prediction Christ will come (ibid., p 9-11).

The second one emphasize the need for God's people to develop their character to the standard expected by God. Herbert E. Douglas (1979, p. 65-82) call it the "Harvest Principle", based in the analogies of the NT between the kingdom of God and the harvest (i.e. Mk 4:26-29; and Rev 14:14-16). He explains that "as the wise farmer must wait for his seed to mature, so Jesus chooses to wait until the gospel seed has produced a sizeable group of mature Christians in the last generation" (ibid., p. 67). He indicates that the source for his interpretation are the commentaries of Ellen G. White on the need for the manifestation of the character of Christ in his people before his coming. He he quotes from the book *Christ's Object Lessons*: "Christ is waiting with longing desire for the manifestation of Himself in His church. When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own" (ibid.). Therefore, Douglas concludes that:

...the delay in the harvest of this world has not been due to a change of mind on the part of the divine Husbandman, or because of a mistake in the divine catalog describing the harvest of this world. As far as God is concerned, and should have ripened decades ago. The divine catalog said: 'anytime within the generation living in 1844!' We live now in the time of the delayed harvest. The fruit - the Christian witness that reproduces the character of Jesus - has not matured as God has wished. Thus, the purpose of planting the gospel seed has not been achieved. (Ibid., p. 68).

The third subgroup can be represented by the position of Morris Venden (1987, p. 25-30). Observing the parallels between the Exodus of Israel from Egypt to Canaan and the Advent movements<sup>1</sup>, Venden underlines Dt 9: 4-7. In this biblical text, Moses said that it was not because of the righteousness of the children of Israel that the Lord giving them the Land, for they were a stiffnecked people; but it was because of the wickedness of the nations of Canaan that the Lord was driven them before Israel (ibid., p. 28). For Venden, the reason of the "delay" is primarily the fact that the world did not yet filled up the measure of its iniquity, as he writes: "So there will come a time at the end of the world, a certain point, when the world has filled up its cup of iniquity and corruption. And that time will come, regardless of what you or I do, or don't do, regardless of what you and I am - or we aren't." (Ibid., p. 29).



(2) The divine aspect - for the tenants of such position, the reasons for the time of the Second coming do not depend of man but rather it has a cosmic dimension and depends much more of God. Branson (1986, p. 13) writes that "when the Lord will return and exactly what will bring His return is beyond our finite knowledge." He concludes that the "problem of the delay" is a mystery to be acknowledged" (ibid.). In an article maintaining a similar position, Firtz Guy writes that:

When the element of transcendence and mystery in the advent hope is recognized, there is no demand for an answer to the question, "Why hasn't Jesus come?"... As in the biblical drama of Job, there may be reasons for the absence of God that remain unknown to humans until after the new beginning of human existence when we enter the immediate presence of God. (Guy, 1986, p. 118).

(3) The third group can be represented by Ralph E. Neall. For him there is no "delay" of the Parousia at all, it is more an apparent "delay" for us who do not know the time. He makes a comparison with a four year-old child who waits for Christmas, for the child "the holiday seems long delayed" (Neall, 1988, p. 91). For Neall "God's purpose know no haste and no delay," therefore the world still waits, but the inheritance will be given at the time God has set (ibid.).

In conclusion, in the "Orthodoxism" the answers to the question of the "delay" of the Parousia can be either positive or negative. In one side, there those who maintain that is a "delay" and the reason for it can be either because of human factors (as in the answers of the first group of the Seventh-Day Adventist ), or because of divine factors (second group among the Seventh-Day Adventists and Hoekema ). On the other side, there are those who deny the very idea of a "delay" (the third Seventh-day Adventist group and the Dispensationalism).

### **3. A CRITICAL EVALUATION AND ESSAY OF AN ANSWER**

#### **3.1. CRITICAL EVALUATION**

In the evaluation of the different interpretations presented above, this study will only address two basic issues: First, the common view held by these interpretations, with the exception of the "Orthodoxism", that Jesus and the Early Church were mistaken in their expectation for an imminent Parousia. Second, the one sidedness common in the "Orthodoxism" when considering the question of the "delay." Besides these two points, only very general observations will be made to some other issues that will be required to address in order to make the above evaluation more logical and clear. These issues, however, will not be treated in a systematic manner. For an extensive critic to issues that are superficially or not addressed here see Gallagher (1982, p. 362-373) and the appendix in Hoekema entitled "Recent Trends in Eschatology" (Hoekema, 1979, p. 288-316).

A great majority of interpreters consider that there was a mistaken expectation for an imminent Parousia in the hopes that Jesus and the Early Christian held for the nearby future. Such misguided hope lead with the passing of time to the crisis of the "delay" and consequently to the abandon of the original expectation of an imminent coming of the Kingdom, and finally a total abandon of the eschatological expectation and its replacement by ecclesiology. However, as E. Earle Ellis observed, Hegel's view of history stands behind the modern theologian's reconstruction of the "delay" as a major crisis. In such reconstruction the hope in an early Parousia would be the "thesis", the fact of the lengthening "delay" the "antithesis", and the "delay" of the Parousia and later abandon of the eschatological expectation the "synthesis". So, Ellis contended, that the difficulty in this issue is not the "delay" itself but a "false apocalyptic speculation" in modern theology (Ellis, 1972, p. 17, 18). Modern interpretation usually fails to understand the tension that exists in both Jewish and Early Christian Apocalyptic between imminence and "delay" (see the discussion of this modern problem in Smalley, 1964, p. 52-54; Morris, 1973, p. 121-136; Bauckham, 1980, p. 4-36; Gallagher, 1982, p. 369-371; Gaventa, 1982, p. 27-42).

As Stephen S. Smalley observed, the sayings of imminence and "delay" are found side by side in the NT, and one cannot separate them so easily as if the sayings of the "delay" were written latter, as it has been done so frequently in modern interpretation (Smalley, 1964, p. 47). He concludes that: "The tension persists, exerting its moral demands as much in the realm of mission



as ethics, and both truths cohere – that Our Lord comes in, even as we wait for him" (ibid., p. 54). Commenting on the tension between imminence - "delay," Leon Morris observed that: "Clearly the first Christians expected some interval and they never indicated how long it would be... All in all one cannot escape the impression that the delay of the parousia is more of a problem to some modern scholars than ever it was to the early Christians" (Morris, 1973, p. 126). For Gallagher<sup>1</sup>:

... The parousia as understood by the New Testament writers is an ever-present reality that no believer can ignore, but its fulfillment cannot be (and never was) quantified in terms of time.

The parousia has always been near since Christ's first advent made his second advent possible. It is hard for western minds to accept the concept of nearness in time not being quantifiable, but that is the very message of the gospels. (Gallagher, 1982, p. 373)

The problem of the the "delay" of the Parousia, as currently understood in modern interpretation, has been usually interpreted more in accordance with the western mind, under a Hegelian structure of thought, than in accordance with the semitic mind where the tension between imminence - "delay" exist and cannot be separated from one another. Therefore the "Consistent Eschatology", the "Realized Eschatology", the "Timeless Eschatology", the "Existentialism" and even the "Moderate Eschatology"<sup>5</sup> do not make justice to biblical expectation by judging it with a western mind and by modern concepts. Indeed, the reality of the Parousia and of the kingdom of God play little role in these interpretations.

On the other side, "Consistent Eschatology" seems to be right when it points the eschatological expectation in the NT as future. However, as Kümmel (1957, p. 62-64) observed, it forces the texts when it wants to see an expectation for the Parousia in the return of the disciples to Jesus in Mt 10:23, or in the death of Jesus at the cross. The "Realized Eschatology" seems also to be right when it points to the importance of Jesus ministry, life, death and resurrection. However, its denial of a future kingdom of God is criticized by many as introducing a Platonic notion into the biblical thought. Dodd's proposal that the kingdom of God is "beyond time and space," that it belongs to "that order of eternal reality whose shadows or reflections form the world of phenomena," is against the biblical concept of the kingdom of God as a reality connected to time and space.<sup>6</sup> For the Bible, the kingdom of God is a historical reality (see further criticism to Dodd's idea in Hoekema, 1979, p. 296). In the "Existentialism," one can appreciate the insistence on the need for a decision in response to the word of God. However, its rejection of all future eschatology is totally arbitrary and the biblical message is reduced to anthropology (cf. ibid., p. 311). The "Timeless Eschatology" also urges man to experience God's reality now. It is, however, very vague in referring to the second coming and the future kingdom of God. Indeed, it almost dismisses these ideas as mere superstitions and comes close to Plato's concept of "timeless" eternity and far away from the biblical view (ibid., p. 305). The "Moderate Eschatology" does much more justice to the NT and its eschatological view. However, it somehow keeps Schweitzer's negative perception on Jesus' and the Early Church's expectation for an imminent Parousia.

In what concerns the "Orthodoxism," the one-sidedness that usually characterizes its approach is its major problem. In the quest to understand the issues related to the Parousia, "Orthodox" theologians have a tendency to emphasize either the divine aspects of the issue at the expense of the their human side, or the reverse. In the NT, the Parousia is depicted as an event that involves both the divine and the human, and therefore any consideration on the "delay" of the Parousia needs to take in consideration both aspects. So "Dispensationalism" seems to take it only under the divine perspective. It emphasizes imminence because of the Secret Rapture that can occur at anytime (whenever God desires). At the same time the Parousia will take place at a fixed time, at the end of the last week of the seventy weeks of Daniel (the time fixed by God). It fails to consider passages such as Rev 6:10, the "how long?" question of the saints. The texts of the "delay" are completely rule out. Besides, "Dispensationalism" view of the Parousia as a double event is highly questionable since the Bible seems to point rather to an unique Parousia, both for the Church and for the world after a period of tribulation (cf. the discussion in LaRondelle, 1983, p. 186-204). The classical evangelical view held by Hoekema represents a well balanced position that tries to take into consideration the different ideas related to the Parousia in the NT. It



is an interesting and serious approach to the problem, however, it is a little vague and general in its definitions. Seventh-day Adventist answers show clearly the tendency of emphasizing either the human or the divine side of the problem. The three groups analyzed had good points and have established them from the perspective of the biblical text. Nevertheless, their one-sidedness is perceptible, leaving room for improvement.

### 3.2. ESSAY OF AN ANSWER

The concept of "delay" is usually defined as the exceeding of a stated period of *time*, beyond which the *event* is considered as late, postponed, delayed. Therefore, as Gallagher observed<sup>1</sup>, in dealing with the question of the "delay" of Christ's return one needs to take into consideration the notion of time and its relation to the Parousia. So, in the quest for an answer to the question of the "delay" one needs to address the questions of *time* and the Parousia, and their correlated issues of *imminence* and "delay."

#### 3.2.1. TIME

In any reflection on the question of time and the Parousia both the divine and the human aspects of the problem must be taken into consideration.

Jonathan Gallagher (1982, p. 368, 369) in his dissertation calls the attention to the relationship between God and time. He points out that God, as part of His divine attributes, is understood to be besides our restriction in time. The eternity of God places Him above time and out of human time. Ps 90: 4 and 2 Pet 3: 8 call one's attention to the fact that for the Lord "a day is like one thousand years, and a thousand years like a day", i.e., there is no time for God, or it is very relative (long periods of time for Him are equal to human very short time). Taking into consideration the divine sphere, it is hard to speak about "delay" in time. In God sphere, it would seem rather be more adequate to speak of imminence for no matter how long a time could last, for it is "like a day that just has gone by, or like a watch in the night" ( Ps 90: 4 ). It is only in the relationship between God and the human time, in the action of God in the human sphere, that such notions of time such as imminence or "delay" take meaning. In His relation to the human time, the Bible represents God as the One who has control of it (Da 2:21; Ac 17:26). When the Bible speaks about the time of the Parousia and God, there is no notion of either of a shortening or of delaying in time, but rather of an established time: The Father knows the day and the hour of the Parousia (Mt 24:36; Mk 13:32); He has set it by His own authority (Ac 1:7); He does not delay it (2Pe 3:9); He will bring it in the time He has established (1Ti 6:14, 15 ). Therefore, in what concerns God, it seems to be more appropriate to say that "God's purposes know no haste and no delay" (Neall, 1988, p. 91).

However, when the NT speaks about man and the time of the Parousia, then a tension between imminence and "delay" is clearly presented. In the watch parables, since man does not know the day and the hour of the Parousia, it is depicted as imminent (Mt 24:42; 25:13; Mk 13:33-37; Lk 12:40; Rev 3:3). The notion of a "delay" in relation to the wicked servant (Mt 24:48; Lk 12:45), the ten virgins (Mt 25:4), and the servants who received the talents or minas (Mt 25:19; Lk 19:12). From this Bible's depiction, one can conclude that the concepts of imminence and "delay" need to be taken in relation to time and man and not to time and God.

#### 3.2.2. IMMINENCE

In Php 1:20-23, Paul expresses his desire "to depart and be with Christ". As Oscar Cullmann noticed, it does not refer to the immortal soul that goes to heaven after the death, but to death and resurrection, as it is indicated later on in chapter 3: 21 of the same book (Cullmann, 1969, p. 170). The interesting point is that Paul associates the immediacy of God's kingdom with the concept of death and resurrection. Does other passages in the NT do the same? In Mt 22: 23-33 and its parallels (Mk 12:18-27; Lk 20:27-40) when questioned about the reality of resurrection, Jesus not only affirmed it but he stated that through resurrection the gap between the living and dead is undone in the perspective of the kingdom for "have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' ? He is not the God of the dead but of the living" (Mt 22:31, 32). In 1Th 4: 15-17, Paul explains that the resurrection makes the Parousia a reality both for the living and dead. One could say that here it is imminent for both, as Paul seems to imply by saying that "He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we





may live together with him" (1Th 5:10). This statement of Paul appears in the context of a discussion about the soon coming of Christ. Also, when Paul says "whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord" (Rm 14:8), for Christ is "the Lord of both the dead and the living" (Rm 14:9) he does it in the context of God's judgement, a theme related to the Parousia. The same appears when he speaks of death and resurrection in 2Co 5 (cf. Cullmann, 1969, p. 167-169). All these passages are related to resurrection and therefore to the hope in the Parousia (ibid., p. 169). The resurrection plays an important role in NT eschatology for "if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1Co 15:19). In the sequence of this text Paul presents again the importance of that hope in relation to the Parousia (1Co 15: 51-56) and exhorts his readers to be faithful for their labor in the Lord will not be in vain (v. 58).

Having therefore such dimension of death and resurrection in relation to the Parousia, one can really say that the coming of the Lord is imminent for no one will wait for the Lord more than the length of his life, and then it becomes really imminent for no one knows how long his life is.

### 3.2.3. "DELAY"

Looking at the sayings of the "delay" in the NT, it is quite noticeable that they are related to multiples aspects, usually related to the human side of the problem, as emphasized by the first Seventh-Day Adventist group of interpretation (preaching of the Gospel; God's people preparedness; possibility of repentance and salvation of future generation; mankind's wickedness). One can also recognize a relationship to a cosmic level as the one emphasized by the second Seventh-Day Adventist group. However, such sayings of the "delay" are kept in balance with those which present God has an appointed time. And when the NT speaks about "delay" it implies that there is no "delay" at all, or that this "delay" is only apparent, as Ralph E. Neall has observed.

Therefore, it would seem more correct to say that the NT presents not exactly a tension between imminence and "delay", but rather the tension between imminence- apparent "delay"-and appointed time, where each element is not conflicting each other but naturally understandable when taken in the tension of time in relation to man and to God. As 2Pe 3:9 says, "the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise as some understand slowness."

### CONCLUSION

The concept of the "delay" of the Parousia, as first proposed by Schweitzer and accepted by a great majority of scholars today, does not do justice to the biblical text and its teaching concerning the Parousia. It is hard even to speak of a "delay," as one usually understand it, for such conception denotes a postponement of an indicated time, implying an error of calculation, and idea that 2Pe 3 clearly argues against. But instead of error, one can perceive an harmony in the NT texts for they take the question of the Parousia in all its dimension, both human and divine. This wholistic view provide the basis upon which the concept of the time of the Parousia must be understood. And Gallagher (1982, p. 369) seems right when he says that:

Since the parousia is a divine event, and since God Himself can experience no delay, it is perhaps more correct to speak of an "apparent" delay since it is only from the man's viewpoint that more time has seemed to elapse than might have been expected. After all, God is said to *know* the day and the hour of the parousia (Mt. 24:36)."

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>. The question of the "delay" of the Parousia in the NT is often related to its parallel issue of the "Day of the Lord" and the coming of God's kingdom in the OT and in the Jewish Intertestamental and Rabbinic Literature (cf. Sinclair, 1975, p. 19-35; Bauckham, 1980, p. 3-36; and Holman, 1982). Therefore its implications goes far beyond the scope of the Early Church, it involves the whole Bible, and the very basis of the judeo-christian religious belief.



<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural quotations are from *The NIV Study Bible*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985. All the word in italics in the biblical text represent my own emphasis to highlight the idea of the delay.

<sup>3</sup> Although there are many similarities between the parable of the Ten Virgins and Luke 12:35-38 ( keeping the lamps burning, waiting for someone, a wedding banquet, knocks at the door, opening the door ) there are too many difference: in Luke there is the question of male servants who wait for their master when in Matthew there is the question of ten virgins who wait for the bridegroom; the master comes from a wedding banquet in Luke, the bridegroom goes to the wedding banquet in Matthew; the master knocks at the door in Luke, the five foolish virgins knock at the door in Matthew; the servants open the door in Luke, the bridegroom opens the door in Matthew; the master does good to his servant in Luke, the bridegroom does not acknowledge the foolish virgins. Therefore the parable of the Ten virgins will be taken in an independent way.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Rm 2: 16; 8: 18 ff; 13:11; 1Co 1: 7; 4:5; 5:5; 11:26; 15: 20-28, 51-57; 16:22; 2Co 4: 14; 5: 1-10; Php 1: 6,10; 2: 16; 3: 20-21; 4: 5; Col 3: 4; 1Th 1: 9-10; 2: 19; 3: 13; 4: 13-5:10; 5: 23; 2Th 1: 5-10; 2:1-12; 1Ti 6: 14; 2Ti 1: 18; 2: 11ff.; 4: 1,8; Tit 2: 13; Heb 9: 28; 10: 25.

<sup>5</sup> Although the "Moderate Eschatology" theologians do recognize the tension between the "now" (imminence) and the "not yet" (delay), they usually consider the imminent expectation to be a mistake.

<sup>6</sup> In the message of the prophets and of the apostles, the theme of the kingdom is always related to time and space, for they spoke about a future time when God will bring His kingdom and establish it upon the earth – cf. passages such as Isa 35; 60; 65:17-25; Da 2:44, 45; 7:13, 14, 26, 27; 12:1-3; Am 9:11-15; Mt 5: 1-12; Jn 14:1-3; Ac 1:6-8; Hb 10:8-16; 2Pe 3: 1-13; Rev 21; 22.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

AUNE, D. E. (1992). "Eschatology (Early Christian)." In: FREEDMAN, D. N. et al. (Eds.). *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday. v. 2, p. 594-609.

BAUCKHAM, R. J. (1980). "The Delay of the Parousia." *Tyndale Bulletin*, v. 31, p. 3-36

BARTH, K. (1933). *The Epistle to the Romans*. Oxford: University Press; London: Humphrey Milford.

BRANSON, R. (1986). "Responding to the Delay." In: BRANSON, R. (Ed.). *Pilgrimage of Hope*. Takoma Park: Association of Adventist Forums. p. 8-17.

BRUCE, F. F. (1982). *1 & 2 Thessalonians*. Waco/TX: Word Books. (*Word Biblical Commentary*, v. 45).

BULTMANN, R. (1957). *History and Eschatology*. Edinburgh: University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1958). *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

CULLMANN, O. (1964). *Christ and Time: the Primitive Christian Conceptions of Time and History*. Rev. ed. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1969). *Des sources de l'Évangile à la formation de la théologie chrétienne*. Paris/Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé. (Bibliothèque Théologique).

DODD, C. H. (1957). *The Parables of the Kingdom*. London: Nisbet & Co.

DOUGLAS, H. E. (1979). *The End: The Unique Voice of Adventists About the Return of Jesus*. Mountain View/CA: Pacific Press.

ELLIS, E. E. (1972). *Eschatology in Luke*. Philadelphia: Fortress



- GALLAGHER, J. (1982). *Believing Christ's Return: An Interpretative Analysis of the Dynamics of Christian Hope*. Ph. D. dissertation, University of St. Andrews.
- GAVENTA, B. R. (1982). "The Eschatology of Luke-Acts Revisited." *Enconter*, v. 43, p. 27-42.
- GLASSON, T. F. (1963). *The Second Advent. The Origin of the New Testament Doctrine*. London: Epworth Press.
- GUY, F. (1986). "Dynamics of the Advent Hope." In: BRANSON, R. (Ed.). *Pilgrimage of Hope*. Takoma Park: Association of Adventist Forums. p.118.
- HAGNER, D. A. (1995). *Matthew 14-28*. Dallas/TX: Word Books. (*Word Biblical Commentary*, v. 33b. CD-ROM edition).
- HOEKEMA, A. A. (1979). *The Bible and the Future*. Grand Rapids/MI: W. B. Eerdmans.
- HOLMAN, C. L. (1982). *Eschatological Delay in Jewish and Early Christian Apocalyptic Literature*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nottingham.
- KÄSEMANN, E. (1964). *Essays on the New Testament Themes*. London: S.C.M.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1969). *New Testament Questions of Today*. London: S.C.M.
- KÜMMEL, W. G. (1957). *Promise and Fulfillment. The Eschatological Message of Jesus*. Naperville: Alec R. Allenson. (Studies in Biblical Theology, no. 23).
- LADD, G. E. (1982). "Eschatology." In: BROMILEY, G. W. et al. (Eds.). *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Grand Rapids/MI: W. B. Eerdmans. v. 2, p. 130-143.
- LaRONDELLE, H. K. (1983). *The Israel of God in Prophecy. Principles of Prophetic Interpretation*. Berrien Springs/MI: Andrews University Press.
- MORRIS, L. (1973). "Luke and Early Catholicism." *The Westminster Theological Journal*, v. 35, n. 2, p. 121-136.
- NEALL, R. E. (1988). *How Long, O Lord ?* Washington: Review & Herald.
- NOLLAND, J. (1993). *Luke 9:21-18:34*. Dallas/TX: Word Books. (*Word Biblical Commentary*, v. 35b. CD-ROM edition).
- PANNENBERG, W. (1968). *Jesus - God and Man*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- McARTHUR, H. K. (1962). "Parousia." In: BUTTRICK, G. A. et al. (Eds.). *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Nashville/New York: Abingdon Press. v. 3, p. 658-661.
- ROWLAND, C. (1992). "Parousia." In: FREEDMAN, D. N. et al. (Eds.). *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday. v. 5, p. 166-170.
- SCHWEITZER, A. (1950a). *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*. New York: Macmillan.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1950b). *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. New York: Macmillan.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1968). *The Kingdom of God and Primitive Christianity*. London: Adam & Charles Black.
- SINCLAIR, L. A. (1975). "Sayings on the Delay of the End." *Papers of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research*, v. 20, p. 19-35.



SMALLEY, S. S. (1964). Delay of the Parousia. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, v. 83, p. 41-54.

TAYLOR, N. H. (1999). Early Christian Expectations Concerning the Return of Jesus: From Imminent Parousia to Millenium. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, v. 104, p. 32-43.

VENDEN, M. L. (1987). *Here I Come, Ready or Not*. Boise: Pacific Press.

WALVOORD, J. F. (1975). *The Return of the Lord*. Grand Rapids/MI: Zondervan.

WERNER, M. (1957). *The Formation of Christian Dogma*. New York: Harper & Brothers.