

Ecclesiastes 4:7–5:7

Living in Expectation of the Coming Age

A. United Effort

The toil of a single person is meaningless, it says in chapter 4:7-12. But The Teacher spoke these words in the communion of saints. These verses stress that in the *church*, when there is a communal need which arises from being under a strange yoke, the main thing is not to work against each other, nor to work as individuals, but to combine all efforts. Individualism, egoism, and materialism are acute, threatening dangers which paralyze the buoyancy of the church. This book shows that in that time not only was national independence missing, but the bond with each other and communal awareness also left much to be desired. This must have been the case in a material as well as a spiritual sense.

That is why we hear the command here to make friends with money and to build up an eternal relationship (cf. Luke 16:9). The brothers must present a united front. In v. 12, The Teacher also promotes a unified spiritual strength against the usurper. That strength is present where the community call is recognized, and where everyone also accepts his neighbour as a help and a brother in the LORD.

This is the best for everyone personally, because alone is indeed alone. (Consider Q&A 55 of the Heidelberg Catechism in this context.) Thus we enter the messianic age.

B. Waiting for the True King and his Faithful Servants

It is possible that there is a connection between chapter 4:13-16 and chapter 2:12. In the latter, the question was raised: how will the new king react to the works of the old king whom he has succeeded? Will he do better, or worse? Of course these were not theoretical questions in The Teacher's days! There are different possibilities in a world where folly and injustice rule. A young foolish king can completely destroy the policies of an old wise king. But the opposite is also possible: an old, foolish king is succeeded by a young, wise king. Will everything turn out well now? In the beginning, everyone is full of enthusiasm, but a later generation again turns away from this king. Why this happens is not explained. It does not say that this king misused his position, nor that he was wise and became foolish. People just do not find joy in him anymore. There is no lasting relationship between the king and his subjects. The main thought is not that popular favour is vanity. Rather, The Teacher longs for a truly wise king, whose subjects are really faithful and thankful, that together they will form a harmonious, theocratic state and national community, as was promised by the prophets. We can say that The Teacher yearns for the fulfillment of Psalm 110: on the throne is the Priest-King, who forms a people that will offer themselves freely for him on the day that he leads his host in holy array. If The Teacher investigates history and man's actions in history (cf. 1:17 and 18), he must come to the conclusion that they are never good, and can never become good, whether the king is foolish or wise. Here is a deep yearning for the coming of the

Messianic-King and his formation of a kingly priesthood (1 Peter 2:1-10). This will be the end of the vanity about which he complains.

C. Binding Life to God's Temple

Almost all exegetes are of the opinion that chapter 5:1 marks a clear break in the book. (See, e.g., K. Schilder's Lenten trilogy, vol. 2, Christ on Trial, chapter 3, esp. p. 58ff.)

In any case, it is remarkable that now The Teacher addresses the church community in the second person: guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Further, we can say that, as soon as the temple is discussed directly, as is the case here, a warning flag is raised. The blood of atonement is poured out in the temple, and here the light of redemption dawns. Here all the emphasis is on drawing near to listen, as often as the priests and Levites read and explain the law (that is, the gospel of redemption). With the temple liturgy, we also think of prayer, the blessing, psalm singing, and reading certain parts of Scripture out loud. Here the heart of the church pulses. (See 1 Chronicles 15:3 and Malachi 2:6,7 about the teaching priest.)

It has been pointed out (correctly) that, for The Teacher, religion is in the first place respect for and submission to God's word of revelation (3:14; 5:7; 12:13). Here, in the temple, the life of the church (and of the world!) again receives guidance. Whoever recognizes the authority of the temple, will not revolt against God when he sees that much is crooked (1:13, 3:16), nor will he be insolent toward the authority of strange powers (although that does not imply passive submission). The temple makes one cautious, because the highest Sovereign lives there, the King of Israel, who has all rulers and nations in his power and who names Cyrus his servant and anointed (Isaiah 45:1).

Throughout the book, one can see the central place which the temple has with The Teacher (cf. 8:10). He especially wants to warn against formalism in the temple, and routine religion. Listening and silence are good, but especially so in the worship service. The connection here must be this: if a person gets worried by a lot of crooked things, then he himself should follow straight paths, first of all in the service of the LORD.

Furthermore, The Teacher wants to put a new heart into Israel and call her to covenantal obedience and perseverance. Then the church does not have to fear the world, and she will see all (world) events in the light of prophecy.

(For further background on this passage, also in relation to the promises which are mentioned, see Numbers 30; 1 Samuel 15:22; Psalm 50:14; Amos 5:24ff. and Micah 6:7. See also Deuteronomy 23:22,23 with Mark 7:11; Acts 18:18 and 21:23.)

Questions

1. In connection with chapter 4:13-16, the question can be asked whether The Teacher indeed sees a need for a change in the established order (And this question is still valid today.) Is the church really a guardian and protector of the existing (social and political) order?

2. What has the gospel (and Paul, in the preaching of the gospel) done, for example, about slavery which existed at the time? Can you say something about the meaning of the Reformation of the sixteenth century for all social and political life? Where must every *radical* renewal begin?
3. Formalism in the church has played a big role in the history of the Church. Can you mention some examples from the history of Israel preceding the exile? Can you show how this sin is again pointed to after the exile in the books Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Malachi?
4. Where does one find those ungodly formalized services (also in relation to the temple) back again in the days of Jesus' earthly ministry?
5. Does Lord's Day 35 of the Heidelberg Catechism mean anything to you in this connection? What about Lord's Day 38?
6. From your own experience, do you know anything about easily promising something but not carrying out your promise, for example, when trouble and dangers have passed?
7. Some (also young) people say: "Then I won't promise anything anymore." What do you think of that?
Note that our "I do", for example at public profession of faith, is also a promise...

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