

CHAPTER 9

THE RETURN OF CHRIST

A religious idea found the world over relates to the notion of a final judgment of individuals to determine their state after death. A related idea concerns the notion that the world will one day be destroyed. These concepts occur in tribal religions, in the ancient religions, as well as in the three monotheistic religions and Hinduism. The dreadful and fearful Day of Judgment involves both punishment and reward, but the ultimate religious quandary concerns the basis upon which the judgment will be made and who will do the judging.

The Hindu concept of reincarnation relates to the idea of judgment wherein an individual is doomed to a repetition of earthly incarnations in either higher or lower forms of life until they live a life sufficiently worthy to allow them to enter a state of eternal bliss. It is judgment without a judge, predetermined by karma without a determiner. If the Hindu teaching leaves many questions unanswered, it agrees with the universal recognition that the human race stands accountable for its behavior. The Hindu ethos which allows for a variety of religious nuances which need not be systematically related as one expects from revealed religion, also contains the idea of a final day of doom when the god Kali dances the dance of destruction and all things in the cosmos are destroyed.

The old Norse warriors of northern Europe believed they could never enter the hall of the gods unless they died with a sword in their hands, preferably inflicting death on another. Heaven could only be attained by fighting ones way in. Contrary to Max Weber's theory about the "Protestant work ethic," the origin of the work mentality probably lies much deeper in the

European psyche than in the teaching of the Puritans who actually placed their misunderstood stress on grace rather than works. If the gods were as self-indulgent and treacherous as Wotan and Loge, however, the old barbarians had no choice but to fend for themselves. What god cared for them? Given the debauched pantheon of northern Europe, the old Europeans looked for a day of doom even for the gods themselves when they would be consumed by flames.

The ancient Romans and Greeks believed that the dead journeyed to the underworld where they received rest or punishment for their deeds in life. The tortures of hell were appropriate to the crimes of life and involved such experiences as the pain of being bitten by poisonous snakes for eternity, the frustration of having refreshing water just out of reach for eternity, and the futility of pushing a boulder to the top of a hill only to have it roll back to the bottom again for eternity. To avoid the prospects of hell, Suetonius indicates that the emperors began resorting to having themselves deified by the Senate. The Roman concept of law and justice intensified the significance of a final judgment with eternal implications for reward or punishment.

Historical Islam, Judaism, and Christianity have also affirmed that each person will stand before God's judgment and give an account of their lives according to God's revealed intentions for human behavior and relationships, with respect to God and one another. Islam and Christianity teach that Jesus will be the one through whom God judges the world.¹ The three monotheistic religions also agree that God will destroy the universe and replace it with a perfect realm, purged of the corrupting influences present in the old order.

With all of the similarities in outlook, the human race shares a fearful outlook on eternity.

How might one be counted worthy to enter bliss and escape just punishment? The gospel of Jesus Christ supplies an answer to this question, distinguishing itself from the answers of the other religious systems of the world.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

The Christian understanding of judgment and the final destruction of the present world order has its basis in the prophecies of Israel. A major focus of the religious writings of the Jews during the inter-testamental period concerned the theme of the end of time. These writings also explored themes introduced by the prophets of Israel.

Old Testament

The prophets of Israel and Judah spoke of a day of reckoning which they designated as the Day of the LORD. The Day of the LORD involved both judgment of Israel and salvation. Cosmic upheaval, social and economic disaster, plague and war will all accompany the Day of the LORD as aspects of God's judgment upon the whole earth (Zech. 14:4, 12-15; 12:1-9; Zeph. 1:10-18; Joel 2:30-31; 2:14-16; Ez. 7:1-27). The wrath and punishment of God will fall upon Israel and all other nations as God brings an end to wickedness in the world (Is. 2:6-22; 13:6,9,13; 34:8; 63:4; Jer. 46:10; 47:4; Ez. 30:3; Obad. 15; Zeph. 2:8-15; Amos 5:18-20). In the face of wrath and destruction, however, God will bring salvation from the oppression of wickedness for the remnant who have sought righteousness (Zeph. 1:3; Dan. 12:3). God himself will purify this remnant like a refiner smelts gold to remove the dross from what is pure (Mal. 3:2; 4:1,5; Zech. 13:9; Zeph. 3:9-20; Dan. 12:10). Over the purified remnant, God will reign as

king forever (Zech. 14:9-21; Dan. 7:21-22; 26-27; Ez. 43:6-9).

Books such as Daniel and Ezekiel vividly portrayed the circumstances surrounding the Day of the LORD, and during the inter-testamental period a number of writings appeared that explored the theme. The Day of the LORD as a day of judgment would involve resurrection of the righteous and the wicked. This idea became a central concern of groups like the Pharisees and the Essenes (see Daniel 12:2). Against the background of the Jewish expectation of the Day of the LORD, the gospel speaks of the return of the Lord Jesus to judge the world.

The Gospels

The Day of Judgment represents a significant theme in the Gospels. Jesus spoke frequently of the coming of the Son of Man which the Jews expected based on the passage from Daniel:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Dan. 7:13-14).

Jesus spoke a number of parables to stress that the Son of Man would come without warning to bring the judgment. Only those living faithfully in expectation of the coming of the Son of Man will be prepared for the judgment when he comes (Mt. 24:37-41; 24:42-51; 25:13-30; Lk. 12:35-46; 17:26-37). In this regard, faith appears as concrete action in anticipation of the expected appearance of the Son of Man. The watchful servant fulfills the wishes of the master, regardless of how long the master delays. In light of his parables that stressed keeping watch, the question of Jesus seems all the more plaintive: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on

earth?" (Lk. 18:8).

To be prepared for the coming of the Son of Man, one must accept Jesus who is the Son of Man. The relationship to Christ creates the basis for admission into the kingdom and exemption from condemnation on the Day of Judgment. Only those whom Jesus knows will be allowed to enter the kingdom (Mt. 7:21-23; 25:11-12; Lk. 13:22-30). The question of what standard of righteousness will permit someone to enter the kingdom forms the central theme of the Sermon on the Mount. Though few scholars argue for the authenticity of the Sermon on the Mount as a single piece, from the perspective of how anyone could enter the kingdom it has masterful unity that compels consideration as an authentic message from Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with an attention grabbing litany that redefines happiness in terms of preparation to enter the kingdom (Mt. 5:3-10). The ultimate blessing in anticipation of entry into the kingdom comes through persecution because of Jesus (Mt. 5:11-12; cf. 19:28). Jesus declared that goodness is the reason for which people have been placed in the world and that without righteousness, no one may enter the kingdom (Mt. 5:13-20). He then explored the failure of the quest for righteousness by demonstrating how people may keep the letter of the law but fail in righteousness because of what lies within them; thus, people fail to achieve the perfection of God (Mt. 5:21-48). People also strive for righteousness through acts of piety, but Jesus exposed the failure of human motive (Mt. 6:1-24). People have the greatest difficulty living by faith and trusting God (which scripture indicated formed the basis for God accounting Abraham as righteous) (Mt. 6:25-7:14). The problem lies in the very nature of people, for "a bad tree bears bad fruit" (Mt. 7:17). Jesus then declared that he presented the way

into the kingdom: those who accepted him and his words would be received by him on the Day of Judgment (Mt. 7:21-27). This thought is reinforced in John's Gospel (John 12:47-48).

Jesus painted a vivid and terrible picture of the fate of those who suffer condemnation. Apart from the words of Jesus in the Gospels, the New Testament is remarkably silent about what punishment will be like. Jesus indicated that the people of Sodom, Gomorrah, Tyre, and Sidon would fare better in the judgment than those who had seen the miracles of Jesus and still rejected him (Mt. 10:15; 11:20-24; Lk. 10:13-15). He said that the Queen of the South and the people of Nineveh had responded positively to the messengers by whom they heard the word of God, and they would stand at the last day to condemn those who rejected him (Mt. 12:41-42; Lk. 11:31-32). In parables Jesus spoke of the destruction of those who rejected the invitation to come to the royal wedding feast and rejected the reign of their king (Mt. 22:1-14; Lk. 14:15-24; Mt. 25:14-27; Lk. 19:27).

Those who fall under judgment will be like chaff and weeds that are gathered together and burned in a fire (Mt. 3:12; 13:24-30; 36-43; Lk. 3:17). The simile speaks as much of the utter worthlessness of a life as it does about the mode of disposition. The actual disposition is one of total consumption in hell (Mt. 10:28; 5:29-30; 18:7-9; Mk. 9:43-50). The experience of hell is one of torture and anguish (Mt. 18:21-35; 5:21-22; 8:29), but it is also described as darkness and isolation (Mt. 8:12; 25:30).

The warnings of judgment appear as part of the total message of Jesus that called for righteousness, but which described even the religious behavior of the best of people as leading to destruction (Mt. 23:1-33; Lk. 11:42-52). All people are subject to the kinds of thoughts,

behavior, and motives that constitute unrighteousness; therefore, Jesus called on all people to repent (Lk. 13:5). Judgment comes as the inevitable end result of a life lived apart from faith in God. Judgment will come as a result of deeds and actions in life, but at a deeper level the deeds and actions of life emerge from the essential nature of a person. Stated simply, bad trees do not produce good fruit (Mt. 3:10; Lk. 3:9; Mt. 7:19; Lk. 13:6-9; cf. John 15:2, 6, 8). Even though a kind action may be good for the one who receives it, a tainted motive in performing the deed corrupts the deed so far as judgment of the person is concerned (Mt. 6:1-18). A good deed does not make one righteous, but a righteous person will do good deeds.

The fundamental problem of people with respect to the judgment is the human heart. No amount of religious observance or philanthropic activity can change what is essentially corrupted in one way or other. It is not the failure to be religious that makes a person unrighteous before God. In contrast to the teachings of Buddha who held that human corruption came from the outside, Jesus taught that human corruption comes from the human heart (Mt. 15:11-20; 7:14-23; Lk. 11:39). In this regard the fruit of a life characterizes the heart of a person, and Jesus indicated that his followers would be recognized by the fruit of their lives (Mt. 7:16-20; Lk. 6:43-45).

The judgment as Jesus described it is not a trial in which the defendant marshals evidence to make a case for being good enough to go to heaven. Jesus described it more as a simple declaration of the way things are. By his definition of righteousness, no one can enter the kingdom of heaven. The problem was not lost on the disciples who missed a great deal, but understood this point (Lk. 18:26; Mt. 19:25; Mk. 10:26). The great separation on the Day of

Judgment will occur as a result of the essential nature of things: wheat and tares, sheep and goats, varieties of fish (Mt. 13:24-30, 47-52; 25:31-46). The Judge will simply declare what people really are when the secrets of all hearts are disclosed; then their deeds will accuse them or excuse them.

This understanding of the judgment provides the context for the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus. One might even imagine that the conversation came following a time of teaching like the Sermon on the Mount. Nicodemus began by acknowledging Jesus as a great teacher from God--a great teacher of the Law. The response of Jesus seems remarkably disjoint unless it took place in a context like his teaching on judgment and righteousness, for he replied, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). In this conversation Jesus describes how a person can experience the fundamental change of nature through the Spirit of God that will allow them to enter the kingdom. Condemnation does not come at the end of time; condemnation hangs over the entire human race. Eternal life is not a privilege that will be taken away from some at the judgment; rather it is an offer God gives to those who want eternal relationship with him. Eternal life will be added to those who did not have it by their nature. Thus, to the disciples' quandary over how anyone can be saved, Jesus replied, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Mt. 19:26; Mk. 10:27; Lk. 18:27).

The dynamic of one's nature manifesting itself in behavior appears in dramatic fashion in the account of the separation of the sheep and the goats (Mt. 25:31-46). The sheep do the sort of things that sheep do and the goats do the sort of things that goats do. None of them think about it

because it is what comes naturally to them. The righteous do righteousness and the unrighteous do not. All will be accountable for their actions on the Day of Judgment (Mt. 12:36-37; John 5:27-30). On the other hand, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will receive it (Mt. 5:6); those who seek the Holy Spirit will receive him (Lk. 11:13), and thereby they will obtain the purity of heart which is necessary to see God (Mt. 5:8).

Jesus made himself the central issue on the Day of Judgment. Those who acknowledged him in this life would be acknowledged by him at the judgment, but those who are ashamed of him in this life, he will be ashamed to acknowledge at the judgment (Mt. 10:32; Lk. 12:8; Mk. 8:38; Lk. 9:26). Punishment will come to those who reject Jesus (Mt. 21:33-44; Mk. 12:1-11; Lk. 20:9-19). On the other hand, those who receive Christ receive life and do not come into condemnation but become children of God (John 1:12-13; 3:16-21, 36; 5:21-22, 24; 6:40, 44, 54).

General Apostolic Writings

After the execution of Jesus for identifying himself as the Son of Man of Daniel 7, followed by his resurrection and ascension, the disciples believed Jesus would return in the manner described in Daniel on the clouds of heaven (Acts 1:11; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; 2 Thess. 1:7; Rev. 1:7). At his appearance, he will change all of his followers instantly so that they become like him (Phil. 3:21; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 John 3:2). As the time draws near for his return, conditions will grow worse and worse on earth as the Antichrist appears and nominal believers abandon the church (2 Thess. 2:1-12; 2 Tim. 3:1; 1 John 2:18-19). The early Christians also lived with a certain tension over when the Lord would return. As the apostles died and Jesus did

not return, critics argued that there would be no return. The church held to their expectation of the Lord's return, though they confessed that they did not understand the timing (Rev. 22:7, 10, 12; 2 Pet. 3:3-4; 8-10).

Cosmic Upheaval. The return of Christ will occur with cosmic upheaval leading up to and coming as a result of his return. The Revelation describes a time of total chaos that affects the physical universe as well as the social, economic, and political order of life on earth. War, famine, plagues, and economic disaster on a devastating scale will occur. This cosmic upheaval is described in three cycles of seven events in Revelation: the seven trumpets, the seven seals, and the seven bowls of God's wrath. The three cycles are in parallel form as they describe the cosmic upheaval preceding the coming of the Lord. This sequence corresponds to the cosmic upheaval described by Christ in the synoptic Gospels (Mt. 24:1-51; Mk. 13:1-37; Lk. 21:5-36) and follows the same outline Christ gave there. The Johannine literature, then, includes a major book to describe what was not included in John's Gospel that the other Gospels had detailed. The detailed vision of the Lord's return appropriately comes through John, the last apostle to die, whose Gospel concluded with a question about the return, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?" (John 21:22).

The idea of the doom of the entire cosmos appears at other places in the New Testament as well. The entire created order will undergo a cataclysmic experience as the universe is consumed (Acts 2:19-20; Heb. 1:11-12; 2 Pet. 3:7, 10). The thrust of these statements, however, is not so much God's destruction of creation as it is the coming of judgment because of humanity's devastation of God's creation. In the judgment, creation will actually be restored and

renewed (Acts 3:21). Thus, the creation awaits eagerly the revealing of the children of God at the judgment when creation itself will be "liberated from its bondage to decay (Rom. 8:18-22). The judgment will come when humanity has brought meaningful life on earth to an abysmal end.

Accountability. At his return, Christ will hold everyone accountable for their lives. Christ himself will judge the world with justice as everyone gives an account of the stewardship of the life God entrusted to them (Acts 17:31; Rom. 14:10-12). The apostles stressed the justice, truth, and righteousness of God's judgment, and God renders to everyone what they deserve (Rom. 2:2; 3:1-8; 2 Thess. 1:5-6; Heb. 2:2-3). Everyone will appear before the judgment seat of Christ to "receive what is due for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10; cf. Rom. 2:7-8; 1 Pet. 4:5; Rev. 20:10-15). The accounting will penetrate beneath the action which people might account good to the secret motive behind the action which God might account corrupt (Rom. 1:18-2:16; 1 Cor. 4:4-5).

Paul stressed the surety of the Day of Judgment particularly in his proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles. He spoke with Felix about "righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come" (Acts 24:25). On Mars Hill in Athens he declared to the crowd that God the Creator had set a day to judge the world by Jesus Christ and that the resurrection proved the judgment was coming (Acts 17:31). Against the background of Roman law and Paul's incarceration by Felix and against the background of the Aereopagus Court of Mars Hill which had sentenced Socrates to death several centuries earlier, the prospect of judgment by the supreme God raised sobering thoughts.

Wrath and the Problem of Evil. At the return of Christ, God's wrath will pour out on the godless and wicked who refuse to repent and receive the gospel (Rom. 1:8; 2:5; 2 Thess. 1:8-9). Because Jesus came to rescue people from the consequences of the judgment, those who oppose the gospel will experience the destruction of God's wrath (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2:16). Only those prepared for the Lord's return will escape the wrath of God (1 Thess. 5:3,9). Wrath will come for disobedience (Rom. 4:15; Eph. 5:6), but the cause for God's wrath goes far beyond the breaking of the law which many have never heard. God's wrath will come to do away with all that is wrong with human nature; therefore, Paul urged people to put to death through union with the death of Christ all that belonged to their human nature (Col. 3:5-6). Those who have toyed with Christ only to abandon the faith may expect the revenge of God (Heb. 6:4-8; 10:26-31).

In the New Testament, the wrath of God settles the problem of evil. In its classic form the problem of evil concerns reconciling the idea of an all powerful good God with the existence of evil. Evil does not exist as a self-existent reality. It only exists as an aspect of people. God has allowed the human race to continue to exist for the benefit of those who may repent of evil and turn in faith to God. In the end, however, God will destroy everyone who works against his righteousness (Jude 5-7, 14-15; Rev. 6:10,16; 14:14-20; 15:1-16:21; 19:1-21). Because of the universality of sin, condemnation is deserved (Rom. 3:8; 5:16), but Jesus Christ came to deliver people from condemnation (Rom. 8:34; 2 Thess. 2:12; cf. John 3:17-21).

Salvation through Christ. Though Christ will return as Judge, he will come to rescue his own people from experiencing the wrath of God (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9). Jesus himself will keep his people blameless and holy on the Day of Judgment (1 Cor. 1:7-8; 1 Thess. 3:13;

5:23). Christ took possession of those who have faith in him through his Holy Spirit, and by his Spirit he keeps his own until his return (Eph. 4:30; Phil. 1:6; 2 Tim. 1:12). When Christ returns, he will claim as his own all who await his appearance with faith, and to them he bestows the promises of salvation (1 Cor. 15:23; Eph. 2:6-7; Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 4:14; Heb. 9:15; 27-28; 1 Pet. 1:13). Those who have faith in Christ will have nothing to fear on the Day of Judgment, because in this life they have become like him (1 John 4:17). Since nothing impure can enter the presence of God "only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" will enter the New Jerusalem, the abode of God (Rev. 21:27).

Righteousness and Faith: As indicated earlier, righteousness serves as the standard for judgment. The critical question for individuals concerns how they might achieve righteousness. The apostles declared that the righteousness necessary to stand before God comes through one's assimilation into Jesus Christ who defines righteousness (Rom. 5:15-21; Phil. 3:9-11). By his sacrificial death, Jesus satisfied the righteous requirements of the Law for all who through faith are crucified with him (Rom. 8:1-4). Those who continue in faith until his appearing will share in the promise made to Abraham whom God counted righteous on the basis of his faith (Rom. 11:20-24; Gal. 3-4; Rom. 3:21-6:23). The gift of righteousness comes not so much as a possession to those who have faith as it is a spiritual transformation that comes with the new creation in Christ (Eph. 4:24). Thus, believers live with the expectation that they will be counted righteous on the Day of Judgment by virtue of their relationship in Christ (2 Tim. 4:8). In the imagery of Revelation this experience of imputed righteousness is represented by garments of the Bride of Christ, which is the church. She appears in "fine linen, bright and clean" which stand

for the righteous acts of the saints (Rev. 19:6-8) who washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:14; 22:14).

Perseverance. While the apostles wrote many things about the return of Christ that had implications for salvation, they wrote to believers with the encouragement to persevere because Jesus will return for his church. For those going through trials, suffering, and persecution the return of Christ offered an encouragement to endure whatever they faced, for when Christ appears he will bring life, vindication, joy, and glory (James 1:12; 1 Pet. 1:7; 2:23; 4:12-19; 5:1-11). The knowledge that the Lord would return instilled in the early Christian a need to persevere in holy living until he came (Rom. 13:12; Gal. 6:8-9; Phil. 1:10; 1 Thess. 5:1-11; Titus 2:12-13; Heb. 11-12; 2 Pet. 3:11-12). The return of Christ also stimulated the church to persevere in the work of ministry, in fellowship, in worship, in prayer, and in a quality of life that leads other to faith (2 Tim. 4:1-2a; Heb. 10:25; James 5:7-12; 1 Pet. 2:12; 4:7). By all means, the return of Christ for judgment and for salvation served as an encouragement for Christians to persevere in the faith (2 Thess. 2:13-17; Heb. 10:32-39; 1 John 2:28; Jude 17, 21; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 11, 12, 21).

Church Discipline. Discipline within the church also had a relationship to the judgment as the saints handed someone over to Satan to suffer physical harm in order that their spirit might be saved (1 Cor. 5:5). Though judgment would come upon the world, the church had the obligation to judge itself within, to exercise appropriate discipline, and to settle disputes, because one day they must judge the world with Christ (1 Cor. 5:9-13; 6:2). God himself exercises

discipline over his children for the purpose of insuring their place with Christ (Heb. 12:4-13; Rev. 3:19). On the other hand, because of the positive force of discipline in the context of a caring fellowship, Christians will boast of one another on the Day of the Lord (2 Cor. 1:14; 1 Thess. 2:19-20; Phil. 2:16; 2 Thess. 1:4). In the context of fellowship and self-examination as the Christians gathered around the table of the Lord, they did so in anticipation of the Lord's return (1 Cor. 11:26).

The Age to Come. On the other side of the Day of the Lord is the age to come. Alluded to throughout the New Testament, it embodies the full expectation of what salvation will mean. With all of the references to the kingdom of God in the Gospels in terms of how one enters it, the apostles spoke very little about the age to come. The certainty of a new heaven and a new earth, the New Jerusalem, the enduring city was certainly held (Heb. 13:14; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1-27). Christ has the exalted place with God in the age to come even though he does not appear to exercise dominion now (Eph. 1:9-10, 20-21; Heb. 2:5). Finally, they knew that all those who love him will have a place in the kingdom when Christ returns (Eph. 2:6-7; James 2:5). All else they relied upon as the hope of glory, the promise of Christ.

Observations

In his teaching about the Day of Judgment, Jesus identified himself as the Son of Man. He indicated that people would be responsible for a higher standard of righteousness than mere adherence to the Law and that judgment would be rendered on the basis of a person's basic nature as manifested in their behavior. He presented himself as the one who supplies the key to

receiving the righteousness needed to appear before God.

The apostles considered the return of Christ as a central article of faith and they warned the world of the coming cosmic upheaval. All people will be accountable to God for the stewardship of their lives, and those who have lived in disregard to God will experience his wrath. Christ on the other hand offers salvation from wrath through the gift of righteousness that comes by faith. On the basis of the expectation of the return of Christ, the apostles urged Christians to persevere and provide mutual support and discipline for one another as they awaited the age to come.

Historical/Theological Development

Despite the fact that Christ did not return immediately, the church never gave up its expectation of the Second Coming. In terms of ease, it would be a minor matter of faith to which Christmas assented, but which played no significant part in the life of individuals or the life of the Church. In terms of crisis social change, the Church has remembered the prophecies and wondered if this might not be the time.

The Montanist Movement

The Montanist Movement began during a period of persecution in the east (170-180). Jerome suggested that prior to his conversion Montanus had been a priest of the Cybele cult which stressed divine possession as well as an excessive, frenzied, ecstatic form of prophecy.³ At his baptism, Montanus began to speak in tongues and to prophecy. He had one basic message to deliver: the end of the world was near and the New Jerusalem would descend in his native land

of Phrygia.

While Montanus stressed the ecstatic gifts of the Spirit as part of his ministry, the feature was not unique to him at that time. The dominant feature of his movement revolved around the expectation of the Lord's return. This expectation included the practice of celibacy and high standards of ethics and morality. A feature of life in the last days included the acceptance of women in the role of prophet. At that early period, the church continued to believe that the Holy Spirit spoke through prophets.⁴ In the Cybele cult women had also played a dominant role. Priscilla and Maximilla shared the prophetic ministry of Montanus and their words were recorded with his concerning the descent of the New Jerusalem and the thousand year reign of Christ. These women who accompanied Montanus left their husbands to await the Second Coming.⁵

Montanus and his followers offered a model for the church in which Christians did not need the hierarchy of the developing church because they had direction from God mediated by the prophets whom the Holy Spirit inspired.⁶ The Montanists in turn were attacked by the developing church structures, not as heretics, but as a danger to order. With the return of Christ expected at any moment, and with prophets to reveal the will of God from the Holy Spirit, church structure, bishops, and clergy seemed unnecessary. In the face of pagan persecution and Christian opposition, the Montanists experienced the kind of suffering one would expect from reading revelation about the troubles for Christians just before the return of Christ.

The Montanist movement played a significant role in discrediting the office of prophet in the church as bishops saw the claim of divine inspiration as a threat to order and doctrine. Thus, the church began to adopt the view that inspiration through prophets ended with the apostles.⁷

The excesses of the movement encouraged the church to move away from its prophetic and ecstatic tradition conspicuous among the martyrs and toward a more hierarchical and ordered mode of institutional life. It also influenced the development of an allegorical method of biblical interpretation which did not take scripture literally as the Montanists had done with John's Revelation.⁸

Montanism became a far spread movement in the empire through the persecutions of 177 onwards. While the expectation faded of the descent of the New Jerusalem in Phrygia, the persecutions fueled the expectation that Christ would not wait long to return.⁹ The strict morality of the Montanists, at a time when church discipline seemed lax in forgiving sins even as severe as apostasy, may have contributed to the popularity of the movement for those who desired high standards.¹⁰ Tertullian accepted Montanist teaching in mid-life and propagated a view of asceticism based on his expectation of the Lord's early return. Montanism had a following in Egypt which may have influenced the direction of the desert fathers who lived their ascetical, hermit existence in expectation of the early return of Christ.¹¹

Montanism faded with the end of persecution and the acceptance of Christianity in the empire, though it persisted in Montanus' native Phrygia where Justinian used violent measures to suppress it 400 years after Montanus. Even among those who did not hold Montanist views, the Second Coming was important during the persecutions. The expectation of the great overthrow of everything in heaven and earth at the end of time composed a significant piece of the evangelistic message to the Gauls from the time of Irenaeus in the second century until Lactantius in the fourth century.¹² With the emergence of Christendom as the new order in the

West, however, Augustine's theology of the millennium replaced the earlier view of a dramatic interruption of history. Augustine taught that the book of Revelation should be understood allegorically, for the millennium was coming to pass through Christ's reign in the church.¹³

The Middle Ages

The Sibylline oracles appeared during the last days of the old Roman Empire in the West following the ascendancy of Constantius, the son of Constantine who favored the Arian party. The Tiburtina foretold a future Golden Age when an emperor would appear to reunite east and west and bring an end to the tyranny of heretics. The people of Gog and Magog would then rebel, precipitating the final crisis before the rise of Antichrist and the Second Coming of Christ.¹⁴ The Christian Sibylline literature rested on a tradition of pagan oracles, of the same Cybelle cult to which Montanus had belonged, and Jewish manipulations of the Sibylline oracle form for proselytizing purposes.¹⁵

In the seventh century, a second Sibylline oracle appeared, Pseudo-Methodius, purporting to have been written by the fourth century martyr, Methodius of Patara. It contained a similar prophecy about a great emperor who would appear, but this time to conquer the Ishmaelites (Muslims) who had seized one Christian territory after another.¹⁶ Then the final conflict would begin before the second coming. This Sibylline tradition would have continuing influence for a thousand years in the politics of emperors and kings who had ambitions of greatness, both in the East and the West.

The Sibylline oracles seem to have provided background for the tone of the First Crusade, which Pope Urban II intended to bring some relief to Byzantium in Asia Minor and in so doing

gain acknowledgement of papal supremacy in the East. A crusade would also provide an outlet for the energies spent on innumerable feudal conflicts of the time, but the crusade was largely usurped by the masses of poor who, inspired by the apocalyptic messages of preachers like Peter the Hermit, committed all manner of atrocities against Muslims and Jews. The masses saw the crusade as the last great battle which would reveal the last great emperor from among the eligible Christian princes.¹⁷

Even the apocalyptic ministry of Savonarola had roots in the Sibylline oracles of the end times. It was in Florence, the Humanist capital of the world, that Savonarola's warnings of impending doom struck their mark. Charles VIII of France represented himself as the long expected Last Emperor of Sibylline fame who would conquer the world in preparation for the return of Christ. He began his adventures by invading Italy in 1494 and aiming for Florence. In this atmosphere, Savonarola preached about the coming judgment, and the people of Florence responded by driving out the ruling Medici family. Savonarola negotiated a peaceful submission to Charles and set about erecting a godly republican government. The monk's prophetic warnings turned more optimistic as Florence now became the vehicle for the dawning of the millennium following the defeat of Antichrist.¹⁸ The message was optimistic, however, only for those who repented and turned to God, for judgment was near:

I have said to you: "The sword of the Lord will come upon the earth swiftly and soon." Believe me that the sword of God will come in a short time. Do not laugh at this "in a short time," and say it is the "short time" of Revelation which needs hundreds of years to come. Believe me that it is soon.¹⁹

In 1495 Savonarola wrote a Compendium of Revelations to demonstrate the accuracy of his prophecies. By 1498, however, Charles had withdrawn from Italy and the Medici pope,

Alexander IV, intended to bring Savonarola's influence to an end. In the face of changing political and economic realities, the citizens of Florence turned against the Dominican and burned him at the stake in the public square.

A second major theme related to the return of Christ in the Middle Ages relates to the study of Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135-1202). Joachim gained a wide reputation as a biblical scholar who had great insight into the interpretation of the prophecies about the end times. He divided human history into three dispensations: the age of the Father, the age of the Son, and the age of the Holy Spirit.²⁰ Joachim taught that the history of the world from creation to the time of Jesus comprised seven periods and that the time forward from the time of Jesus to his second coming would also involve seven periods. He identified the first dispensation of seven periods with the Father and the second with the Son, but this scheme created a problem in providing the Holy Spirit with a temporal sphere of influence. Joachim resolved the problem by assigning to the Holy Spirit the seventh period of the Son's dispensation. As the seventh period, or sabbath, it need not have the same fixed duration as the other six periods.²¹

Joachim expected Christ to come, intervene in history, and destroy Antichrist. He calculated the coming of Christ based on the prophecy of Daniel 12:7, 11, 12 which speaks of 1260, 1290, and 1335 "days" respectively. Joachim took the days to mean years which he numbered from the birth of Christ, concluding that the return would occur in 1260, 1290, or 1335.²² He saw a correlation between contemporary events and the rise of the Antichrist, who has followers alternatively considered to be Saladin, Emperor Frederick II, and Alfonso of Castille.²³

Though widely respected and sanctioned by the Pope, Joachim became the object of

condemnation by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). Joachim's scheme provided intellectual credibility to the conviction that God is not remote from Christians but intimately present through the Holy Spirit. The system set up conflict, however, between those who accepted it and saw themselves as model people of the final age of the Holy Spirit, and those who rejected it and must, therefore, be considered agents of Antichrist.²⁴ Joachim's concept of three dispensations could not be reconciled with the officially accepted Augustinian understanding that there would be no millennial reign of Christ on earth except through the church, but his scheme certainly fit the popular theology influenced by the Sibylline oracles.²⁵

Despite the condemnation of Joachim, he continued to be popular, particularly among the mendicants who believed his references to the two orders of spiritual men who would bring in the kingdom referred to the Dominicans and Franciscans. The "Spiritual" Franciscans in particular saw the transition to the third dispensation coinciding with the ministry of Francis of Assisi. In 1254 Gerard of Borgo San Donnino wrote Introduction to the Eternal Gospel in which he declared that the last age, the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, would begin in 1260. Following Joachim's scheme, he taught that the "Spiritual" Franciscans who followed the original intent of St. Francis would be the instruments for the coming of the new age.²⁶ The issuance of the book caused such a stir that the church removed John of Parma from office as Minister General of the Franciscan Order and replaced him with Bonaventure. For his part Gerard suffered life imprisonment.

The Reformation Ease

The Second Coming formed a motif that ran through the Reformation from the time of

the Hussites to the disintegration of the Puritans. The radical wing of the Hussites movement became millennial in the Joachite tradition when opposition to them increased in 1419. They viewed the institutional Roman Church as Antichrist. Having established a fortress settlement as a center of activity, they prepared to take up arms against Antichrist. Naming their settlement Mount Tabor after the place in scripture where Christ foretold his Second Coming, they became known as Taborites. The Taborites waged successful warfare until a major defeat in 1434 at the hands of the more conservative Hussites, the Ultraquists.

The Reformers' view of the Roman Church led them to reject the Augustinian understanding of the millennium. The Taborite view of Rome or the Pope as Antichrist generally prevailed during the Reformation period with an underlying expectation the Christ would soon return to establish his kingdom. As the major concern of reformers, however, this theme only predominated among fringe groups.

Melchior Hoffman, an Anabaptist, prophesied that he would return with Christ in 1533 following his imprisonment and execution. Furthermore, Christ would establish the New Jerusalem at Strasbourg. Apocalyptic concern heightened over Hoffman's prophecy because 1533 was regarded as the fifteen hundredth anniversary of the death and resurrection of Christ. When 1533 came and went, Jan Matthys, an Anabaptist baker from Haarlem, declared that Münster would be the real site of the New Jerusalem in 1534.

The city of Münster had a population of about 15,000 when its troubles began. Religious deviation had begun in 1531 when Bernard Rothmann, a young Catholic priest, began preaching Lutheran doctrine. Despite opposition by the bishop, the guilds supported Rothmann and forced

the town council to install Lutheran ministries in all the churches. Rothmann's religious pilgrimage did not end there, however, for by 1533 he had become an Anabaptist. Rothmann's sympathizers on the town council granted liberty of conscience to Anabaptists setting the stage for a massive influx of Anabaptists. They flocked to Münster expecting to be saved in the New Jerusalem when the rest of the world was destroyed sometime before Easter 1534. The great influx resulted in an Anabaptist victory in the town council election of February 23, 1534.²⁷

The Anabaptists expelled the Lutherans and Catholics to cleanse the city. In return, the Lutherans and Catholics began the siege of the city on February 28. Within the walls Jan Matthys assumed theocratic control, executing enemies and abolishing private ownership of money and property. Matthys died leading an assault on the besiegers, Jan Bockelson succeeded Matthys and soon introduced polygamy to the community before arranging his accession as King of the New Jerusalem. Bockelson enforced his apocalyptic rule with frequent executions. This episode finally ended June 24, 1535 with a successful assault on the city. Of those who had not starved or been executed by Matthys, the conquering army exterminated virtually the whole population.

During the rise of English Puritanism, the English church party intent on completing the Reformation in England, Joseph Mede (1585-1638) attracted attention for his study of Revelation and his conclusions about the coming millennium. Concerns about the end of time were ripe during the Reformation period anyway because for a thousand years the Church in the West had followed Augustine's view that the millennium coincided with the Church. If Satan was bound in the fifth or sixth century, then the political, economic, social, and religious chaos of Europe a

thousand years later was evidence that Satan was once again loose and the end of the world drew near. Mede broke with this scholarly tradition, however, and taught that the millennium had not yet begun.²⁸

From the time of Henry VIII's break with Rome, the English government and church had encouraged the identification of Antichrist with the Pope. The memory of the Lollards who had made the same identification no doubt aided in popularizing the view. Beside Mede several other scholars promoted millennial speculations. Thomas Brightman published a commentary on Revelation in 1609. Johannes Alsted taught that the first three vials of Revelation were poured out between 1517 and 1625 with the last judgment expected about 1694. John Napier, the Scottish inventor of logarithms, calculated the fall of Rome as 1639 and the end of the world about 1688. By the 1630's and early 1640's the Puritans had decided that the reign of the Beast and Antichrist included the despised Archbishop Laud and the Church of England.²⁹

In contrast to earlier millenarian works, Thomas Goodwin's sermon A Glimpse of Zion's Glory was preached by one who stood close to the new power brokers of Civil War England. Goodwin's reading of Revelation had influenced his move from Presbyterian thought to Independency activism. No mere demagogue, Goodwin came to a strong conviction about the congregational form of church government which he regarded as the beginning of the Kingdom of Christ.³⁰ Millenarian themes like those sounded by Goodwin became a main feature of sermons preached before the Long Parliament, setting the tone for their deliberations. As the Parliamentary Army became increasingly independent in its ecclesiology, the millennial views made respectable by scholars the caliber of Goodwin, who became both President of Magdalen

College and chaplain to Cromwell, had a ring of respectability. Prophetesses like Lady Eleanor Douglas and Mary Cary joined divines like John Owen in viewing the execution of King Charles I as a necessary move to make way for the reign of Christ.³¹

By the early 1650's millenarianism developed a radical streak which sought the overthrow of all remnants of the "fourth monarchy." Among the Independents during the Civil War and Commonwealth, a number of soldiers accepted the view that the four world empires of Daniel 2 and 7 had ended. The fourth empire, Rome, had apparently lived on in its constituent parts, but the "fifth monarchy" or the reign of Jesus would soon begin.³² The fifth Monarchists differed from the earlier Puritan millenarians in three respects: they believed that they had the responsibility to clear the way for the fifth monarchy rather than waiting for God to do it, they identified by name contemporary figures in English life whom they believed were mentioned in biblical prophecy, and they developed a plan for the structure of Christ's coming kingdom.³³

When Cromwell dissolved the Barebones Parliament in 1653, the Fifth Monarchists also consigned Cromwell's government to Antichrist and plotted its overthrow. Thomas Venner, one of the most brilliant of the Fifth Monarchists, attempted to overthrow the government, but the plot was discovered and Venner went to the Tower until 1659.³⁴ After the Restoration, Venner attempted a second rising which the government put down violently. John Bunyan's imprisonment and the severe persecution of all non-conformists followed on the heels of the abortive Fifth Monarchy rising.³⁵ The failure of the armed rising influenced the Quakers to abandon their earlier radicalism and adopt a policy of pacifism for which they became well know.³⁶

The Third Rome

In the East, the continuation of the Empire had as much importance for the divine plan of salvation as the existence of the church. Everyone knew that Rome was the fourth and last empire of the Book of Daniel, and it would witness the return of Christ. With the fall of Byzantium to the Turks in 1453, however, eastern Christianity entered a crisis. The expectation arose that the end of the world would come in 1492, seven thousand years after the accepted date of the creation of the world.³⁷ So convinced was it that the end of the world would come in that year, the Moscow Church did not prepare a calendar beyond 1492. The end of the seventh millennium had particular import, coinciding as it did with the end of the empire, since there had only been seven councils, seven sacraments, seven days, and seven pillars of wisdom.³⁸

When the end did not come, Metropolitan Zosimus prepared new Easter tables for the calendar and declared the dawn of a new Christian era with a new Constantine and a new Constantinople. Just as the political and spiritual legacy of Rome had passed to Constantinople the Russians believed that Rome continued in Moscow. This understanding of Moscow as the third Rome was first articulated by Starets Filofey of Pskov. The view quickly gained acceptance as the only possible interpretation of events. Thus, Grand Duke Ivan III of Moscow (1462-1505) became Tsar of Russia, the Russian equivalent of Caesar. He married the niece of the last Byzantine emperor and claimed the insignia of Byzantium, the two headed eagle, as the standard of the new Rome.³⁹ On the basis of this understanding of the prophecies of the end times, the Metropolitan of Moscow assumed the office of patriarch which the four patriarchs of the Orthodox Church confirmed in 1589.⁴⁰

Moscow became the only city of Eastern Christianity ruled over by a Christian prince after the fall of Byzantium. The reorientation of Orthodox Christianity from Constantinople to Moscow occurred during the same hundred year period as the Protestant Reformation. The Russian Empire, newly independent of the Tatar yoke, began with a perceived divine mandate to continue the life and work of the Byzantine Empire with specific reference to the defense and advance of the faith. To explain the disastrous fall of Constantinople, the seat of Christianity, the Russian Church concluded that God had punished the Emperor and the Patriarch of Constantinople for entering into communion with Rome at the Council of Florence (1439) in a bid for military aid. Though God had punished Constantinople for consorting with Rome he had not ended the fourth empire but had transferred it to Moscow owing to the Russian devotion to God.⁴¹

So strong was the belief in Moscow as the third Rome, both politically and spiritually, that a Great Schism occurred in 1653 when Patriarch Nikon ordered a revision of the Russian liturgy and customs to conform with those of the Greek Church. Regarding the Greek Church as corrupt, owing to its punishment by God for its relations with Rome, the "Old Believers" broke with the patriarch and refused to make changes. Archpriest Avvakum who led the initial opposition to the reforms concluded that the "time of suffering" had come.⁴² To accept reform meant rejecting Moscow's place as the Third Rome. This being the case, the Third Rome had fallen and there was no empire left to be a fourth Rome; therefore, the end of the world must be coming soon. For supporting the reforms and inspiring the new social order, Tsar Alexis earned the epithet of Antichrist.⁴³

In his initial reforms, Nikon gave instructions that the sign of the cross should be made with three fingers instead of two, as had been the Russian custom. In pre-literate peasant society, the liturgy and the customs were the doctrine of the church. To change either was to abandon the true faith as imbedded in its ritual.

In 1667, a council that included both Russian bishops and several Orthodox patriarchs deposed Nikon. Instead of nullifying Nikon's reforms, however, the council condemned all who refused to follow the changes. The important monastery of Solovki refused the instructions which resulted in an eight year siege from 1667 till 1676. The Tsar's forces killed all but fourteen of the two hundred monks when the siege finally ended. The government action only increased the conviction of the Old Believers that the reign of Antichrist had begun.⁴⁴

It was a time of apocalyptic expectation: the hermit Kapiton had gained a wide following at the beginning of the seventeenth century through his teaching that the world would soon end for Antichrist already ruled.⁴⁵ Under the regency of Sophia, elder sister of Peter the Great, Old Believers routinely suffered death as enemies of the state and its church. Some of the more militant Old Believers, in following Kapiton's teaching not only sought martyrdom, but even committed suicide. The 2700 Old Believers who seized Paleostrovskii Monastery set the chapel afire and died in the flames. A similar incident happened at Berezov na Volok. In place after place, Old Believers burned themselves alive for fear that their faith would fail if captured by the forces of Antichrist. This episode finally ended through the influence of Evfrosin who taught that Christ provided the faithful only two options in persecution: flight or martyrdom. Suicide was not an option for it betrayed a lack of faith.⁴⁶

Old Believers did not comprise a monolithic movement but involved numerous sects that splintered from the common experience of rejecting the reforms of Nikon in the 1650's. By the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, Old Believers would number in the millions. The Old Believers formed communities in isolated regions of the vast empire in which they preserved their old liturgical forms and Russian customs during the period of radical westernization introduced by Peter the Great.

American Christianity

Concern about the Second Coming of Christ had figured prominently in American Christianity since the time of the Puritans. Jonathan Edward's postmillennialism which he took for the emerging pattern of how Christ would create the millennium through his church before his return.⁴⁷

Dispensationalism. By the end of the tumultuous nineteenth century, however, a growing number of evangelicals began to reject postmillennialism for a premillennial view. The most widespread transdenominational, premillennial movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is dispensationalism. John Darby (1800-1882) developed the dispensational framework of history with its eight covenants and seven dispensations or ages.⁴⁸ Among the unique and controversial features of this system are the pre-tribulation rapture of the Church whereby Christians will escape the persecution and suffering of the tribulation period, and separate ways God deals with Israel and the Church.⁵⁰

Dispensationalism spread quickly through the Bible conference movement of the last nineteenth century beginning with the Niagara Bible Conference of 1875. These gatherings led

to conferences on Bible prophecy which Dispensationalists dominated. Dwight L. Moody adopted dispensational views early in his ministry, and most of the major evangelists of the next hundred years would follow his lead. Seminaries, on the other hand, viewed Dispensationalism with alarm. James Snowden's survey of seminaries in 1919 found that only seven of the 236 professors surveyed in twenty-eight seminaries held dispensational views. Rather than discrediting Dispensationalism, however, this study tended to discredit seminaries among those in the growing Fundamentalist-Dispensationalist camp.⁵⁰ Schools like Moody Bible Institute, Columbia Bible College, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA) were founded in large part because of the growing disenchantment with the old seminarians and divinity schools.

The crowning achievement in the spread of Dispensationalism probably came with the publication of C.I. Scofield's reference Bible with copious notes explaining the Bible in terms of its covenants and showing the continuity of scripture from one dispensation to the next. This Bible plus the visual aids that Dispensationalists produced, such as time lines and charts, made the Bible understandable to the average lay person at a time when seminaries had become enamored with a critical approach to scripture which made the Bible either more obscure or more mundane. The wars of the twentieth century and the establishment of an independent Jewish state after nearly 2000 years have encouraged serious consideration of Dispensationalists teaching, especially at the height of the Cold War. Dispensationalists would also point to the theological liberalism of the American Protestant establishment as a fulfillment of the biblical warning of the proliferation of false teachers in the last days.⁵¹

Cultic Groups. While Dispensationalism operates across denominational lines within orthodox Christianity, several significant religious groups have emerged and departed from the orthodox faith over an initial concern about the Second Coming. Mother Ann Lee gained a following through the teaching of revelations she claimed to have had beginning in 1770. The Shakers believed the Second Coming was actually a second incarnation with Ann Lee as the second visitation of the Messiah. They believed that the millennium began in 1792 through the foundation of the Shakers.⁵²

Joseph Smith claimed that he received the Book on Mormon as a preparation for the Second Coming of the Messiah. Organized April 6, 1830, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints came into being to gather the saints for the thousand year reign. Smith told his followers that they would live to see the Second Coming, but that the saints must first create a colony worthy of the Lord.⁵³

William Miller, a Baptist preacher without formal training, developed his own understanding of biblical prophecy, concluding that the Second Coming would occur October 22, 1844. Through a series of conferences, preaching tours, and periodicals, the teaching of Miller became well known. He gained both a following and an opposition. After the date passed without incident, the Adventist group developed out of Miller's followers.⁵⁴ Charles Taze Russell was influenced by the Adventists to start a Bible study group to determine God's plan for the world and humanity. In 1876 he became pastor of the group that would become the nucleus of Jehovah's Witnesses.⁵⁵

The Return of Christ as Good News

The fear of death, the anxiety over one's state in eternity, and the dread about the end of the world have faced cultures since the beginning of recorded time. Oral tradition suggests that the concern goes back into the mists of prehistoric times. The concern is not limited to primitive societies. During the Cold War, the technological powers created a probable scenario of total thermo-nuclear war that would destroy the world. Diplomatic paranoia also developed the need for a "doomsday" bomb. Now environmentalists fear that a green house effect caused by global warming will lead to the eventual extinction of life. Underlying all of this concern rests the gnawing fear resulting from finitude which cannot control cosmic events. The gospel teaches that into this fragile world Christ will return.

Chaos

The return of Christ addresses the chaos that afflicts the world. This state of chaos afflicts all realms of human experience, though not necessarily to the same degree at the same time in all cultures. Political, social, economic, cultural, and religious systems all fall prey to this chaos, and they in turn spread the chaos to the environment. Environmental chaos proceeding from human chaos can affect entire eco-systems, global weather patterns, and biological disasters.

The chaos that afflicts "this present evil age" already stands condemned. At his return, Christ will exercise judgment over the chaos. For those who live as victims of the chaos at whatever level, or for those who grieve over the chaos, the return of Christ offers good news that

God cares and has already set a time to set things in order.

Accountability

Rather than providing an excuse to withdraw from the world or complacently live with the satisfaction that God will eventually work everything out, the return of Christ demands that his followers be about his business until he returns. If he presently reigns, and his spirit inhabits his people, then no efforts in his name will be futile. With injustice seething through societies all over the world, the accountability that demands that Christians live responsibly also creates a standard of justice. When the world seems so unfair and the weak, little ones seem to bear the brunt of the injustice, the return of Christ offers good news to those who cry for justice.

Evil

The cry to God also comes in the plaintive cry, "Why?" How can evil abound when God exists? Why does God allow evil? Why do bad things happen to good people? People do not merely ask the question intellectually; they experience the question emotionally. The Bible discusses the issue in numerous places; such as the Psalms, Job, Romans 8, the story of Joseph, and to a certain extent the entire history of Israel pursues the question. Without overly discussing it, the sufferings of innocent Jesus culminate the problem with respect to the sovereign Creator, for God stood in the position of those who must sit and watch the one they love as they suffer.⁵⁶ People experience the problem at the micro level, the level of their personal experience in all of eternity. God resolves the problem at the macro level, the point at which time and space are rolled up like a scroll. At the return of Christ, evil shall be no more. Rather than supply a

philosophical explanation until then, the gospel simply affirms that evil and its causes shall be consumed. For those who suffer and those who must watch, the return of Christ offers good news that God will wipe it all away along with the tears.

Rescue

From beginning to end, Christian faith revolves around a savior who rescues. Unlike the civil religion of America that stresses self-reliance, the Christian faith stresses dependency on Christ that will culminate in rescue when he returns. Unlike the morbid psychological dependency that robs people of their independence, dependence upon Christ frees people to act responsibly until his return. Instead of the idolatry of human dependence, dependence upon Christ frees one from defending the chaos of the world. Instead of the fear of death, destruction, and oblivion, the gospel teaches that Christ will return to rescue those who love him from the final judgment of the present world order. For those who see the end coming and recognize that human initiatives to create great world orders only intensify the problem, the return of Christ offers good news that God will intervene to rescue the beloved.

Justification

Many people struggle to justify their existence. They have had a chance at life, but did they make the most of it? Was their life valid and worthwhile? Do they have a right to exist? The problem of justifying one's existence is complicated if one also has a conscience that still functions well enough to generate guilt and fear over past actions. As a result, the idea of a final accounting can fill people with great dread. The gospel teaches that at the return of Christ, the

lives of his followers will be justified on the basis of his life instead of their own.⁵⁷ Those who fear the judgment because of their sin may escape condemnation on the basis of the righteousness of Christ. Sin was condemned and destroyed on the cross for all those who died with Christ; therefore, they will stand justified at the judgment.

When I was a pastor, a teenage boy told me that he lay awake one night unable to go to sleep. All he could think about was what would happen to him when he died. He felt sure that he would go to hell. His story surprised me because neither I nor the previous pastor had used "scare tactics" about the terrors of hell to manipulate the teenagers. Instead, the feelings emerged from deep within him. As it turned out, he had a great deal about which to feel guilty. That night in his bed alone, he trusted Christ as his savior. Twelve years later he has grown to maturity as a teacher and deacon. Fear does not play a part in his theology, because Christ freed him from that fear when he realized he would stand justified before Christ at the judgment. At that time I realized I was derelict in not dealing with the fear of judgment with teenagers in an intentional, albeit responsible way. Just as a counselor need not fear raising the idea of death with a suicidal person, one need not fear raising the issue of judgment with a teenager. Their consciences still work. For the person who fears the prospect of judgment and condemnation, the return of Christ offers good news that he will justify us.

Perseverance and Reward

The return of Christ culminates in the reward of the Kingdom. All that eternal life with God will bring, which no mortal can fathom, lies out before those that Christ gathers to himself at the judgment. Christianity is not a world denying religion like Hinduism, nor does it deny the

reality of suffering as Buddhism does. On the contrary Christ promised his followers that they could expect suffering in this world. On the other side of judgment, however, lies the reward of faithfulness to Christ. Eternity with Christ is the reward for wanting to spend eternity with Christ. Those who do not want to spend eternity with Christ will not have to do it.

Some criticize a faith that they derisively refer to as "pie in the sky by and by when I die."

While this may be a legitimate concern about wealthy Christians who live in ease and use the prospect of eternal reward as an excuse not to follow Christ in this life, the criticism sounds awfully spiteful when hurled at those poor souls who will face nothing but misery in this life, as they realistically understand. A woman in Russia whose husband is not a believer told me that her joy will come in another world. This woman has a profound faith, for she lives her life as an offering to Christ. She perseveres in her faith because she trusts the One who has given her the promise of a new world. For those who have nothing in this life as well as for those who recognize the hollowness of what they do have, the return of Christ offers the good news of great reward for those who persevere in their faith.

NOTES

¹In Islam, the judgment will be carried on by a tribunal that also includes Moses and Mohammed.

²The issue of motive greatly concerned T.S. Eliot after his conversion. He placed on the lips of Thomas in Murder in the Cathedral these words, "The last of these is the greatest treason, to do the right thing for the wrong reason."

³Michael J. St. Clair, Millenarian Movement in Historical Context (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 80.

⁴Kenneth Scott Latourette, A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500, rev. ed., vol. I (new

York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), 128-29.

⁵St. Clair, 82.

⁶Theodore Olson, Millennialism, Utiopianism, and Progress (Buffalo; University of Toronto Press, 1982), 93.

⁷Latourette, 134.

⁸St. Clair, 85-86.

⁹Norman Cohn, The Pursuit of the Millennium, rev. ed. (London: Maurice Temple Smith, Ltd., 1970), 25.

¹⁰Latourette, 138, 216.

¹¹Ibid, 225.

¹²Cohn, 27.

¹³Ibid, 29.

¹⁴Cohn, 31.

¹⁵Bernard McGin, "Teste David Cum Sibylla: The Significance of the Sibylline Tradition in the Middle Ages," Apocalypticism in the Western Tradition (Brookfield, VT.: Variorum, 1994), IV:7-16. McGin gives an overview of the career of the Sibyle from pagan times.

¹⁶Cohn, 32.

¹⁷Ibid., 61-88.

¹⁸Bernard McGin, Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 277-278.

¹⁹Ibid., 280.

²⁰St. Clair, 100.

²¹Olson, 112-116.

²²Ibid., 120 n.17.

²³St. Clair, 101.

²⁴Olson, 125, 127.

²⁵Cohn, 109.

²⁶Rufus M. Jones, The Eternal Gospel (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1938), 3.

²⁷Cohn, 258-262; St. Clair, 172-173.

²⁸Olson, 199-200.

²⁹B. S. Capp, The Firth Monarchy Men (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 27-36.

³⁰Tai Liu, Discord in Zion: The Puritan Divines and the Puritan Revolution 1640-1660 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 4-7.

³¹Capp, 50-51.

³²D. H. Kromminga, The Millenium in the Church (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1945), 180-181.

³³B. S. Capp, "Extreme Millenarianism," in Puritans the Millenium and the Future of Israel, ed. Peter Toon (London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd, 1970), 68.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 84.

³⁵Christopher Hill, A Tinker and a Poor Man (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 105.

³⁶Christopher Hill, The World Turned Upside Down (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), 194.

³⁷Nicholas Zernov, Eastern Christendom (london: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961), 140.

³⁸Ernst Benz, The Eastern Orthodox Church: Its Thought and Life, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1963), 181.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 181-182.

⁴⁰Zernov, 141; see also Nicolas Zernov, Moscow the Third Rome (New York: AMS Press, 1971), 48.

⁴¹Zernov, Moscow the Third Rome, 31-35.

⁴²For an account of Avvakum's life, see Serge Zenkousky, ed., Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles, and Tales (New York: 1963), 322-370.

⁴³Robert o. Crummey, The Old Believers & the World of Antichrist (Modison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1970), 14.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 4, 19-20.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 7,

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 45-47, 56. See also Sergius Bulgakov, The Orthodox Church (London: The Centenary Press, 1935), 210.

⁴⁷Timothy P. Weber, Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 13-14.

⁴⁸C. I. Scofield, ed., The Scofield Reference Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), 1, 3 n.4-5.

⁴⁹Weber, 21.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 27-33.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 87.

⁵²J. F. C. Harrison, The Second Coming (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979) 166.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 177-181.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 194.

⁵⁵See Melvin D. Curry, Jehovah's Witnesses in Cults and Nonconventional Religious Groups, ed. J. Gordon Melton (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), *passim*.

⁵⁶I am indebted to Frank Tupper for this insight.

⁵⁷N.T. Wright explored the theme of justification at the judgment in his Gheens Lectures at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, April 25-27, 1995.