

# The Lord's Word Concerning The Last Things

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*Maranatha!* This Aramaic expression, meaning "Come, O Lord!" is the prayer of the Apostle Paul as he closes his First Letter to the Corinthians (16:22).<sup>i</sup> These words had become as much a part of the early churches language as the terms Hallelujah and Hosanna, Abba and Amen. For that reason Paul does not find it necessary to translate them into Greek in writing to the Greek-speaking Corinthians.

*Maranatha* was used by the Christians of the apostolic age as a constant reminder of the Savior's promise "I will come back" (John 14:3). "Come, O Lord!" was their daily prayer. They lived in eager expectation of His speedy return. With fervent longing they awaited the fulfillment of His promise.

The Apostle John concludes the Book of Revelation by recalling that same promise. "I am coming soon," was Jesus' pledge. "Come, Lord Jesus!" was John's response (Rev. 22:2). We who live in the twentieth century are inclined to be less conscious than were those first century Christians of our Lord's impending return and the end of this present world. More than nineteen hundred years have passed since Jesus visibly ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives. The days and months and years of our lives slip by with a regularity that lulls us into the false assumption that this routine will continue indefinitely. We eat, we sleep, we work, we play, often without giving so much as a passing thought to the fact that God has plainly told us that some day all of these activities will come to a crashing halt.

God did, to be sure, give Noah the solemn promise after the Flood. "While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease" (Gn 8:22). As a sign and seal of this promise God placed the rainbow into the sky.

So in spring the farmer sows his seed, fully expecting to reap a harvest in fall. In late summer a mother buys warm clothing for her children in preparation for the cold that is to come. A family purchases an air conditioner during an off-season sale because it anticipates the heat that lies ahead. The factory worker kisses his wife goodbye with a cheery, "I'll see you tonight," confident that he will return home after eight hours at the plant. We go to bed at night and expect the alarm to wake us in the morning.

Whether we remember God's promise to Noah or not, God keeps His word. And even if we are reminded of that promise on occasion at the sight of the rainbow, we are apt to overlook the important words with which God introduced the covenant He made with Noah. "While the earth remaineth" clearly implies that this world will not continue indefinitely. It is not eternal. Some day the cycle of life will be interrupted. Some day it will come to an end.

That end will come suddenly, unexpectedly. It will come, the Bible says, like a thief in the night (I Thess. 5:2; II Peter 3:10). Jesus compares its coming with the coming of the Flood. God had warned the world that because of its wickedness He would destroy it. He threatened to send a universal flood. But He gave mankind 120 years of grace. Nevertheless, they did not heed His call to repentance. They continued in their evil ways, and so the Flood came. Recalling that catastrophe, Jesus warns His disciples, "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating and drinking, marrying and being given in

marriage up to the day that Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same, “ He says, “in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying, selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just like this on the day when the Son of Man is revealed” (Luke 17: 26-30).

How easily even we Christians lose sight of this warning, however! Oh it is true, we recite the Apostles’ Creed and confess our faith that Jesus “shall come to judge the quick and the dead. “But how often don’t we subconsciously—though unintentionally—push that thought out of our minds! Must we not all admit that only too often we go about our daily life as if we didn’t really believe this, as if it really couldn’t happen?

In May of this year we began the observance of the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. *Grace 125* is our anniversary theme, gratefully acknowledging God’s abundant grace through the past 125 years of our Synod’s history. The passing of those years ought to serve to remind us also that “the end of all things is near,” as Peter declares (I Peter 4:7). It ought to heighten our anticipation of our Lord’s return and inspire us to pray more frequently and fervently with the saints of old, “*Maranatha!* Come, Lord Jesus!” It is therefore very appropriate that in this anniversary year we turn our attention to the topic which has been assigned for this essay:

## **THE LORD’S WORD CONCERNING THE LAST THINGS**

In the study of Christian doctrine the subject of the last things is called eschatology, a name taken from the Greek word *eschata* meaning “last things.” This is a very broad area since the Bible has much to say about death, the end of the world, the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the final Judgment, eternal damnation in hell, and everlasting life in heaven.

It is obvious that in the limited time at our disposal we can not enter into everything that Scripture teaches concerning these matters. But since it is also obvious that with every passing day and hour we are drawing closer and closer to the end of all things, we shall focus our attention especially on this aspect of the Lord’s Word concerning the last things. Our discussion will center on the following three points:

- I. The certainty of the end of all things;
- II. The signs of the end of all things; and
- III. The proper preparation for the end of all things.

Before taking up the first of these points we should explain that since the end of all things is signaled by our Savior’s Second Coming, we shall often refer to it in this way; but it is not our intention to review the many interesting facets of the part of eschatology dealing with His Coming as such.

We should also explain that we understand the phrase “the Lord’s Word” in the assigned topic in a broad sense. All of Scripture, the whole Bible, is the Lord’s Word. The four evangelists do, indeed, record many statements made by Jesus Himself with respect to the end of the world. But Jesus speaks to us also through the rest of the Old and New Testament Scriptures. All of these writings are therefore properly called the Lord’s Word. All of them were written under the inspiration of the Spirit of Christ, who in a supernatural way prompted and guided the

holy writers so that the words they penned are individually and collectively the very words of our God.

With these preliminary remarks we turn now to our consideration of the first point:

## **I. THE CERTAINTY OF THE END OF ALL THINGS**

The Lord's Word makes it crystal clear that He who brought all things into being will also bring all things to an end. The first words of the Book of Genesis are "In the beginning. " When God created the world, time began. Time is His creation. God Himself lives in eternity (Isaiah 57:15). He is not bound by time. With Him "a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" (I Peter 3:8).

On the fourth day of creation God placed the sun, moon, and stars into the heavens. Among other purposes He appointed them to be "for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years" (Gen. 1:14). They regulate time. They are God's timekeepers.

As the first day of God's creation constituted the beginning of time, so also the last day of this world will mark the end of time. When Judgment Day arrives, there will be no more time (Rev. 10:6). That will be the end, the absolute end, of all things. All of history is moving surely, swiftly, and inexorably toward that day.

God, the Creator, is also the Preserver of this world. He is the Lord of history. History is the unfolding of His eternal counsel and will. He governs and controls all that transpires on the stage of history.

Jesus is "the radiance of God's glory" through whom He made the universe (Heb. 1:2,3). It is Jesus also who sustains all things by His powerful word (Heb. 1:3). If it were not for His sustaining and preserving word, the heavens and the earth would immediately revert to the nothingness that existed before they were created. Christ, Paul says, "is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). But when God's eternal plan and purpose—"to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph. 1:10)—has been accomplished, He will ring down the curtain on this world's stage.

That the end of all things is certain is clear first of all from the unequivocal and unimpeachable testimony of Jesus. He speaks at length about the end of the world and the Day of Judgment in the twenty fourth and twenty-fifth chapters of the Gospel according to St. Matthew and in the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. There is a parallel account in the thirteenth chapter of Mark's Gospel.

When Jesus sadly informed His disciples that because Jerusalem had rejected Him, the city and its temple would be destroyed so that not one stone would be left on another, the disciples asked, "When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age? (Matt. 24 3) In His response Jesus links both of these events together, the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the impending end of the world. They are interrelated, closely connected. The destruction of Jerusalem served both as a prelude to and as a type of the destruction of the world. The former represented God's just judgment on the apostate Jews. The latter will constitute His holy and righteous judgment on an impenitent and unbelieving world.

An interval of more than nineteen hundred years has already separated these two key events in Jesus' prophecy. It is a characteristic feature that we observe in the prophecies recorded in Scripture that when they speak of related events that lie in the future, they often do this without putting them into the perspective of time. It is like looking from a distance at two mountain peaks without seeing the valley that lies between them.

We have an example of this feature of prophecy in John the Baptist's testimony concerning Christ. Comparing his own work with the more important work of his successor, John tells the Jews, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire," (Matt. 3:11,12). In one breath John refers to Jesus' outpouring of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost and the culmination of His Messianic work in the final judgment.

The Prophet Joel links these same two events when he records the Lord's promise, "I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh," and in the same context announces the awesome signs that will usher in the end of the world: "I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord come" (Joel 2:28,30,31). Again we notice that no indication is given with respect to the time that will separate these two great days.

This lack of a time perspective in Biblical prophecy makes it difficult for us at times to determine whether a statement refers exclusively to the first, or exclusively to the second, or to both of such related future events. We pointed out a few moments ago that what happened in the destruction of Jerusalem served not only as a prelude to the end of the world, but also as a type foreshadowing the events of the last days. So, for example, terrible suffering and distress characterize the time of both of these events.

That we have difficulty in understanding the prophecies in the Bible that have not yet been fulfilled does not mean, of course, that God's Word is unclear. The problem lies not in God's Word, but in our limited ability to comprehend these deep mysteries of God. We are like an old woman with cataracts on her eyes who can barely make out the form of her grandchildren, even though they are standing in the bright noonday sun. The Apostle Paul touches on this problem that we have in the famous thirteenth chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians: "We know in part, and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (I Cor. 13:9-12).

The fact that this world will come to an end is clear beyond a shadow of a doubt from the words of Jesus, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Matt. 24:35). Although we may not understand just *how* God will cause this to happen there can be no misunderstanding regarding the fact itself. Jesus' words are plain enough. The heaven and earth which God created in the beginning are going to disappear. The time when that happens Jesus calls "the end." In reply to His disciples' question concerning the sign of His coming and the end of the age, Jesus mentioned various signs. We shall study these more closely in the second part of this essay. For the present we merely wish to note that after enumerating these signs, Jesus expressly declared, "Then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14).

Jesus also testified repeatedly about His so-called Second Coming, His return on the last day as the God-appointed Judge of the living and the dead. In Matthew 16:27 we read, "The Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done." Standing trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin, Jesus declared under oath, "In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64).

Yes, the testimony of Jesus is explicit and clear: He will come again. The end of all things is certain.

In addition to Jesus' own testimony we have that of His apostles. The Evangelist Luke records the promise given to the disciples through two angels at Jesus' ascension into heaven. "Men of Galilee, " they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Jesus will return, and He will return visibly, just as He ascended visibly in the presence of His disciples until a cloud hid Him from their sight.

The Apostle Paul refers frequently to Christ's Second Coming and the end of all things. Time does not permit us to cite all of the pertinent passages. We call attention to only a few of them. In I Corinthians 7:31 Paul asserts, "This world in its present form is passing away." Again he says, "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (II Cor. 4:18). The great Apostle devotes the entire fifteenth chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians to the subject of the resurrection. The dead will be raised he says, and "then the end will come" (v. 24). This will take place "at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable and we shall be changed" (I Cor. 15:52). The blast of that trumpet will signal the end.

Peter is equally emphatic and explicit in asserting that the end of all things is certain. In the third chapter of his Second Letter he writes, "The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look toward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heats. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (II Peter 3:10-13).

As a final apostolic witness to the certainty of the end of all things we hear the testimony of the aged veteran, John. In the first chapter of the Book of Revelation he exclaims, "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen" (Rev. 1:7). Describing his vision of the final judgment, John writes, "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them" (Rev. 20:11). Then John says, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea" (Rev. 21:1).

From all these passages—and many more could be adduced—it is evident that the New Testament clearly teaches that the end of all things is certain.

The question may arise, however, whether this doctrine is also taught in the Old Testament. There are many interpreters of the Bible who boldly assert there is a radical difference between the Old and New Testaments. They deny that Israel in Old Testament times had a clear conception of the end of the world or a hope of the resurrection of the dead, despite such clear and comforting passages as the triumphant confession of Job, "I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eye shall behold, and not another; though my veins be consumed within me" (Job 19:25-27)

On investigation we find, however, that the testimony of the Old Testament regarding the certainty of the end of all things is just as decisive as that of the New Testament. We have previously referred to the prophecy of Joel concerning "the great and terrible day of the Lord"

(Joel 2:31). The words of the Hundred and Second Psalm are just as clear and plain as those of Peter. In a passage quoted in the New Testament by the writer to the Hebrews (1:10-12) the Psalmist says, "Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the work of thy hands. They shall perish, but thou shalt endure; yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment, a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end" (Ps. 102:25-27).

The Prophet Isaiah writes similarly: "Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it. For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine. And I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity.... Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth shall remove out of her place, in the wrath of the Lord of hosts and in the day of his fierce anger" (Isaiah 13:9-11,13). God's judgment on ancient, ungodly Babylon, which the prophet envisions in this chapter, was a beginning and type of His final judgment on the wicked world.

Again Isaiah writes, "All the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll; and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig tree" (Isaiah 34:4).

It is through Isaiah also that the Lord addresses His people: "Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look upon the earth beneath: for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment, and they that dwell therein shall die in like manner: but my salvation shall be for ever, and my righteousness shall not be abolished" (Isaiah 51:6).

Like the New Testament, the Old Testament also foretells the Second Coming of Christ. In these prophecies, however, we will frequently note that absence of a time perspective of which we spoke earlier. For example: in the Ninety Sixth Psalm David exclaims: "Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof. Let the field be joyful and all that is therein: then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice before the Lord: for he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth; he shall judge the world with righteousness, and the people with his truth" (Ps. 96:11-13).

In these words David announces the coming of the Lord, but he does not distinguish between the Lord's First Coming in humility as our Savior and His Second Coming in glory as our Judge. Both Advents are a cause for rejoicing. Through His First Coming our redemption was accomplished; through His Second Coming our redemption is consummated as we enter into the full enjoyment of our eternal inheritance.

The judgment also of which David speaks is a double one. Even now Jesus judges us not guilty in His sight because His perfect righteousness covers all our unrighteousness. Paul glories in this truth and joyfully exclaims, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). But this verdict will be publicly proclaimed when Jesus takes His place on the judgment seat on the last day.

Yes, the testimony of the Old Testament prophets coincides perfectly with that of Jesus and His apostles. This present world is destined to pass away. The only difference is that in the New Testament God has given us a fuller and more complete revelation of what the future holds in store for us. Whereas the Old Testament sketches the events of the last days in broad outline, the New Testament unfolds these developments in greater detail. In that respect God's revelation in the Holy Scriptures is cumulative.

An example of such an unfolding of details its to be found in the New Testament's description of how God will destroy this present world. Isaiah had said that God would shake the heavens and remove the earth from its place. Both Joel and Isaiah prophesied that the suns moon, and stars would stop shining, and Isaiah added that they would fall like autumn leaves (Joel 2:3.1; 3:15; Isaiah 13:10). In other words, the forces of nature such as gravitation and inertia that keep the sun, moon, stars, and planets in their appointed places in the heavens will be suspended. As a result, the whole universe will collapse. There will be a cosmic cataclysm of almost inconceivable magnitude.

In His discourse on the Mount of Olives Jesus reminds His disciples of these Old Testament prophecies. He describes the tribulation of the last days and then says, "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'" (Matt. 24:29).

Peter enlarges on this description somewhat by adding the information that God will destroy this present world by means of fire. He tells us, "the heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat" (II Peter 3:10,12). The entire solar system, the great galaxies extending through the vast reaches of space with their billions upon billions of stars – all will be swept away with a thunderous roar as if by a cosmic hurricane. The relationships of space and time will be abolished.

Out of the ruins of the old world God will then create "a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (II Peter 2:13).

Some have supposed that the substance itself of the present heaven and earth will be annihilated. They believe that matter itself will revert to nothingness, the condition that existed prior to the beginning. The expressions which Scripture uses in speaking of God's new creation lead us to agree with Luther, <sup>ii</sup> however, that it is more probable that a complete transformation and renovation will take place.

In I Corinthians 7.31 Paul says that "this world *in its present form* is passing away" (παράγει γὰρ τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου). In Romans 8 he states that the whole creation, which "has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (v 21), "waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed" (v. 19) and that "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (v. 21). Jesus speaks of the change that will take place as "the renewal (παλιγγενεσία) of all things" (Matt. 19:28), and Peter uses the term "restoration" (ἀποκατάστασις) of all things (Acts 3:21). Add to this that the Bible assures us Christians that our human bodies, though they will be changed and glorified in the resurrection, will be the very same ones we had in this life (Phil. 3:21; Job 19:26,27).

It may seem to some, perhaps, that in emphasizing the fact that the end of all things is certain as we have, we are belaboring the obvious. Our reason for stressing this point is, however, the fact that despite the clarity with which Holy Scripture teaches that the heavens and earth which are now will pass away, there are many who deny this. As the centuries pass and the Lord Jesus delays His promised Second Coming, the number of scoffers steadily increases.

Peter prophesied that this would happen. He says, "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 they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the

heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and with water. By water also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (II Peter 3:3-7). Jude, too, calls attention to what the apostles of our Lord foretold: “In the last days there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires” (vv. 17,18).

In the days before the Flood Noah was “a preacher of righteousness” (II Peter 2:5). He warned the ungodly world of his day that God’s judgment was about to sweep them all away. But they mocked the old man. They thought he was crazy. What sane person would spend his time building such a huge ark for a flood that would never come?

Then to their horror “the flood came and took them all away” (Matt. 24:39). In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month (Gen. 7:11) God’s hundred and twenty years of grace expired. He had stayed the execution of His sentence to give men time to repent. But they despised His grace and ignored His warning.

Is it any different today? Jesus has promised that He will come again. He has warned that heaven and earth will pass away. But how many take His words seriously? How many, even among us, got up this morning with the thought that Christ might return *today* before the sun sets?

Although more than nineteen hundred years have passed since Jesus left this world to ascend to His throne in the heavens, we dare not let ourselves be deluded into thinking that He has forgotten His promise. Peter admonishes us, “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” (II Peter 3:8, 9).

Who are some of the scoffers who deny that the end of all things is certain and that Christ will come again? Foremost among them are the atheists and evolutionists. They laugh at these prophecies and warnings.

From every side we are deluged by evolutionist propaganda. Ever since Charles Darwin published his *Origin of Species* in 1859 scientists, educators, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, and even theologians have united their voices in a loud and blasphemous chorus: Matter is eternal. Life originated not as the result of a special and unique creative act of an almighty God, but spontaneously, by pure chance. The world, which came into existence about five billion years ago through some fortuitous cosmic accidents will continue indefinitely unless it should meet with some equally fortuitous cosmic accident in the future, or unless man himself should destroy it by carelessly, or maliciously, unleashing uncontrollable nuclear forces. Mankind is continually progressing onward and upward. Life is an ongoing struggle for existence with the survival of the fittest. Man is mere matter. He has no soul, but is simply a higher form of animal life. His feelings, thoughts and activities are merely mechanical impulses; and when he dies, he reverts to the elements, possibly to be recycled at some time in the distant future.

Obviously, in this mechanistic philosophy of life there is no room for God. Religion has no place. It is an irrelevant form of superstition that must be discarded as man climbs the ladder of intellectual progress. The logical conclusion of Darwin’s thesis that man had no special beginning is that he has no special purpose and no destiny. Sigmund Freud, drawing this conclusion, went on to assert that, consequently man is not bound by any moral restraints. Anything and everything is permitted since man is accountable to no one for his behavior.



These pernicious ideas pervade the thinking of modern man. Julian Huxley, an influential British biologist and philosopher, is an articulate advocate of atheism. He writes:

The god hypothesis is no longer of any pragmatic value for the interpretation or comprehension of nature, and indeed often stands in the way of better and truer interpretation.

It will soon be as impossible for an intelligent, educated man or woman to believe in a god as it is now to believe that the earth is flat, that flies can be spontaneously generated, that disease is a divine punishment, or that death is always due to witchcraft. <sup>iii</sup>

This atheistic philosophy has been accepted by many nominally Christian theologians. Paul Tillich, a modern theologian who died in 1965 and who professed to be a Lutheran, depersonalizes God. He speaks of Him as “the ground of being.” He denies the Triune God of the Bible and insists that the protest of atheism against the concept of God as a heavenly, completely perfect person is correct. “There is no evidence for his existence,” Tillich claims. <sup>iv</sup> Obviously Tillich did not believe the biblical doctrine of the end of all things and of Christ’s visible return.

One of Tillich’s disciples, who was also strongly influenced by Huxley, is the Church of England’s Bishop John A. T. Robinson. He wrote a book a few years ago that took college campuses by storm. It is called *Honest to God* <sup>v</sup> and calls into question the basic beliefs of Christianity. Since then Robinson has written another book entitled *In the End God*. In this book he writes:

If I am asked, in the sense in which the questioner usually means it, ‘Do you believe in life after death?’ or ‘Do you believe in the Second Coming?’ – that is, ‘What do you think is the state of the individual five minutes, or five years, after death?’ ‘Do you think Christ will in any literal sense come back?’ – my only honest answer is, ‘I do not and I cannot know.’ <sup>vi</sup>

Could anything be more pathetic than the confession this agnostic in clerical robes here makes? For him Christianity has to do not with the hereafter, but with the here and now. He rejects theism, the doctrine that God is the center of all things, and embraces humanism. The creed that man is the measure of all things. In yet another of his books he speaks even more frankly (and blasphemously!), asserting:

1. God is intellectually superfluous.
2. God is emotionally dispensable.
3. God is morally intolerable. <sup>vii</sup>

Permit me to quote a few more sentences from Robinson’s *In the End God* because it seems to me that he correctly assesses the spirit of the times in which we live. Here is what he says:

One of the most commonly observed features of our age is the apparent decline of interest in the so-called ‘after life.’ Even preachers only refer to it peripherally, except in

Advent courses. In the younger generation I detect a widespread skepticism and lack of conviction that it matters. Young Christians too seem content to suspend judgment. <sup>viii</sup>

Another modern theologian who has exerted a profound influence on the thinking of both Protestant and Catholic seminary professors, preachers, and parish pastors is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was hanged by the Nazis in 1945 because of his political activities. Like Tillich, he called himself a Lutheran. In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, however, he writes:

God as a working hypothesis in morals, politics, or science, has been surmounted and abolished; and the same thing has happened in philosophy and religion.... For the sake of intellectual honesty, that working hypothesis should be dropped, or as far as possible eliminated. <sup>ix</sup>

Bonhoeffer believed that for the world come of age a “religionless Christianity” was imperative. Naturally, he did not accept the clear and simple teachings of the Bible about the end of all things and the return of Christ. Ridiculing the doctrine of the resurrection, which is so precious to us, Bonhoeffer writes:

The decisive factor is said to be that in Christianity the hope of resurrection is proclaimed, and that that means the emergence of a genuine religion of redemption, the main emphasis being on the far side of the boundary drawn by death. But it seems to me that this is just where the mistake and danger lie. Redemption now means redemption from cares, distress, fears, and longing, from sin and death, in a better world beyond the grave. But is this really the essential character of the proclamation of Christ in the gospels and by Paul? I should say it is not. <sup>x</sup>

Many contemporary theologians have come under the spell of Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann claims that the Bible must be demythologized. By that he means that it must be reinterpreted so as to bring it into harmony with the evolutionistic philosophy of twentieth century man. Bultmann does not believe that the resurrection of Christ and the other miracles recorded in Scripture actually happened. No modern man, he insists, can believe that they did. The supernatural events the Bible reports are, as far as Bultmann is concerned, mere myths. Jesus, Bultmann says, did not really ascend into heaven. It is self-evident, therefore, that He will not return.

One of Bultmann’s avid disciples was the late Episcopal Bishop Pike. Pike, too, insisted that to be viable and tenable in our highly sophisticated world, Christianity must demythologize itself of the teaching of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. <sup>xi</sup> In other words, it must discard this doctrine. Modern man is too intelligent, according to Pike, to believe such primitive superstitions. It is ironic, however, that before his death in 1969 Pike fell into the delusions of the devil to such a degree that he took part in a spiritistic seance on a national television networks.

Let us not make the mistake of thinking that these blatant denials of the Biblical teaching concerning the end of all things and the return of Christ are too “far out” to affect us! Some of our children are exposed to them every day in public schools. Our young people are confronted with them in college and university classrooms. They enter our homes via TV and radio, the daily newspaper, and popular magazines.

Some of us may be shocked to learn that heresies of this kind are also being preached from Lutheran pulpits. Let us not think that these ideas are accepted and propounded only in Unitarian circles or among non-creedal, social-gospelizing Methodists. A pastor of the Lutheran Church in America by the name of J. Schoneberg Setzer wrote a book that was published in 1968 under the title *What's Left to Believe?*<sup>xii</sup> In this book Setzer devotes a chapter to the question "Will Jesus Return?" We are told:

One of the most picturesque and constant doctrines of Christianity since the first disciples began testifying about Jesus has been the claim that he will return in heavenly splendor to be the judge of the living and the dead in a great drama of resurrection and judgment. As the Nicene Creed declares it: "And he shall come again with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end." The Apostles' Creed affirms that Jesus now "sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

But after two thousand years this claim has still not been fulfilled. And today Christian laymen, as well as Christian scholars, are increasingly concerned to study the earliest Christian documents and, by using the tools and findings of modern historical research, to reevaluate this ancient dogma of the church.<sup>xiii</sup>

It is Setzer's belief that in the New Testament the early Christian community foisted on the church an interpretation of Jesus' messiahship and the kingdom of God which is totally different from what Jesus Himself actually taught. This perversion of Christ's teaching, according to Setzer, includes all that orthodox Christianity has always taught concerning Christ's ascension to the right hand of God, concerning the signs of His return to judge the living and the dead, concerning the destruction of the present heaven and earth, concerning the resurrection of the wicked and the good, concerning the final judgment, and concerning the believers' entrance into heaven and the unbelievers' condemnation to hell. All these doctrines, Setzer admits, are taught in the New Testament, and he lists the passages. Nevertheless, he maintains that in all of this the early church was forcing on Jesus an eschatological "suit of clothes" that He never wanted to wear.

Setzer recognizes that a very crucial part of the New Testament's concept of Christ's kingdom is the imminence—or closeness—of Jesus' return. "The court of time," Setzer asserts, however, "has judged that the early church was wrong about this interpretation of the kingdom of God, simply because the soon-promised end never came at all."<sup>xiv</sup> Consequently, he concludes:

Jesus' failure to reappear in glory means that the entire doctrine must be reexamined. Traditionally the church has usually decided in its perplexity that the New Testament writers were correct about the *fact* of Jesus' return but wrong about the *nearness* of it. Or, the church has simply avoided the issue by labeling all the 'coming soon' passages as unfathomable mysteries. But today we must more honestly admit that if the New Testament writers could be wrong about the fact of an early return of Jesus, they could also be wrong about the fact of the second coming of Jesus itself. So today there is generally a consensus among biblical scholars and theologians that the second coming of Jesus was an erroneous doctrine of the early church, that either Jesus or—

much more likely—the disciples alone were very wrong about the kind of messiahship that Jesus was intended by the heavenly Father to have.<sup>xv</sup>

One reads such charges with amazement. How can Setzer possibly make such claims in view of the many clear passages in the Bible that speak about Christ's Second Coming? The explanation is that Setzer simply sets these passages aside by claiming that a large part of the material in the four Gospels is exaggeration, or even legend.<sup>xvi</sup> He argues that one must distinguish between the actual sayings of Jesus and an interpretation by the first Christians of what Jesus said.

This approach to the Bible is known as form criticism. It is part of the so-called historical-critical method of interpretation. The historical-critical method is the kind of interpretation advocated by the professors who were dismissed from Concordia Seminary at St. Louis last spring and who then established an opposition seminary they called Seminex. What the destructive results of the historical-critical method are is apparent from Setzer's radical surgery on the corpus of the New Testament.

But what then is Setzer's conception of the true message of Jesus? According to him,

Jesus believe that he was commissioned to lead men and women into the kingdom of God that is being established in that on-moving dimension called the here and now....

Jesus believed that the great judgment is taking place right now and at every moment in history as the thousands of people who die every day pass in an unending stream before the eternal Father into the destination for which their kind of living with God and man has prepared them.<sup>xvii</sup>

For Setzer Jesus' return is purely symbolical or metaphorical. He puts it like this:

After his death Jesus has indeed returned among us in greater glory than ever. For every passing generation of history bears witness that the revelation of God's truth that he brought is the secret to noble and stable and fulfilled living. Jesus is also the great judge, in a symbolic sense, because we are all being judged according to our active acceptance of the truth of God that he revealed.<sup>xviii</sup>

The biblical doctrine of hell is outside the scope of this essay, although it does belong to the broad subject of eschatology. It is deserving of our notice incidentally, however, that Setzer alleges that "the Christian church today is coming to the conclusion that the doctrine of a literal Hell for the eternal torment of souls cannot hold any more water than the literal eternal Hell itself was supposed to hold." He holds that Hell is "the mess either individual or social – that men make out of this life." Christians today, according to Setzer, "affirm that Hell is right here in this life when our sins, the sins of other peoples, and even chance misfortunes overwhelm us with trouble."<sup>xix</sup>

We have devoted considerable attention to Setzer's views because his is a classic example of the spiritual wreckage that constitutes the end of the road for those who travel down the slippery highway of modern theology. "What's Left to Believe?" (the apt title of Setzer's book) is the question that must be faced by the countless churches and churchmen who are traveling down that road today. Finally, when they come face to face with God, their theology

with all its pseudo-wisdom will go up in smoke, and they will be left standing naked, holding nothing but a handful of ashes.

How important it is that we cling firmly to the vital truths that Scripture presents to us so clearly! In words that are so simple that a child can understand them it tells us that the end of all things is at hand. We are not dependent on the findings of some scholar's research to determine what passages in the Bible are the Lord's Word. We don't need professional theologians to sift the authentic teachings of Jesus from the erroneous views of the early Christian Church.

It is our Lord Jesus who is speaking to us in all that Matthew and Luke, Peter and Paul, and the other holy men of God wrote. Oh that we would continue to read our Bibles with the attitude of the Thessalonians, to whom Paul wrote. "When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God" (I Thess. 2:13)! Then we will accept every passage of Scripture as totally trustworthy. And then we will also take proper note of the Lord's Word concerning the signs of the end of all things – which brings us to the second part of this essay.

## **II. THE SIGNS OF THE END OF ALL THINGS**

From eternity the day has been set when God will terminate time and history. Neither in the Bible nor anywhere else has He, however, revealed to us when that day will come. In Matthew 24 Jesus says, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (v. 38). As true God, Jesus was, of course, omniscient. But in His state of humiliation, in which He refrained from the full and continual exercise of His divine powers, Jesus did not know the day or the hour of the end.

"Therefore keep watch," He exhorts, "because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" (Matt. 24:42). His coming will be as unexpected as that of a thief. "So you must also be ready," He says, "Because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Matt. 24:44). He emphasizes this admonition by means of three parables, that of the servant whose master put him in charge of his affairs while he went on a journey of undetermined duration, the familiar story of the wise and foolish virgins waiting for the bridegroom, and the parable of the talents. In the course of His discussion Jesus repeats the admonition, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hours" (Matt. 25:13).

Paul the Apostle warns in his First Letter to the Thessalonians likewise that the day of the Lord will come as suddenly "as labor pains on a pregnant woman" (I Thess. 5:3).

In spite of these warnings, history records the names of numerous false prophets who have claimed to know what Jesus says no man knows. This very claim brands such date-setters as deceivers. In New Testament times there were even errorists who made the astounding assertion that the day of the Lord had already come. Paul found it necessary to advise the Thessalonian Christians "not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter" to this effect purporting to have come from him (II Thess. 2:2).

During the apostolic and post-apostolic period there were both Jews and Jewish Christians who had apocalyptic dreams that found expression in many apocryphal writings. Millennial expectations are to be found even in the apostolic fathers.

About the middle of the second century after Christ a Phrygian enthusiast named Montanus and two women associated with him, Prisca and Maximilla, alleged that the return of Christ was imminent. A millennial kingdom with its center in the Phrygian village of Pepuza

would soon be established and a golden age inaugurated. The Montanist movement attracted thousands of adherents, including the famous lay theologian Tertullian.

During the Middle Ages there was a strong feeling that Judgment Day, the terrible *dies irae*, was at hand, and various prophets predicted when it would occur.

In Luther's time a fanatic by the name of Michael Stiefel announced that October 19, 1533, would be the day. He became very angry with Luther for not believing him. Another date-setter was the noted Lutheran theologian Johann Albrecht Bengel, the author of a frequently quoted commentary on the New Testament. Bengel, who died in 1752, predicted that the millennium would begin in 1836.

In 1831 William Miller set 1843 as the date for Christ's return. The anticipation of his 50,000 or so followers reached feverish heights. When his prediction failed to materialize, Miller claimed he had miscalculated, and the actual date would be October 22, 1844. The expectations of his disciples now rose to even greater heights. But again they were disappointed. Mrs. Ellen White, a Millerite, shortly afterwards announced that Christ had actually returned in 1844, but His return was invisible. At that time, supposedly, He began the cleansing of the sanctuary before His visible return which would follow somewhat later. Mrs. White and her husband founded the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

Charles T. Russell, the founder of the sect now known as Jehovah's Witnesses, made the claim that Jesus had returned invisibly in 1874 and predicted that in 1914 Satan would be destroyed and a new utopian era would begin. To his chagrin, 1914 was the year the First World War broke out. Russell's explanation was that in 1914 Satan was cast out of heaven and the invisible part of God's church was established. Russell's successor, Joseph F. Rutherford, continued the practice of setting dates for various eschatological events.

Prognosticators of doomsday and related catastrophes have captured the headlines rather frequently of late. A few years ago a local newspaper in Hertford, England, carried the notice, "The world is definitely coming to an end on Wednesday, December 11, 1968, at noon precisely." That day came and went. The editor subsequently re-ran the article with the postscript, "We're still here!"<sup>xx</sup>

In 1969 a 28 year old housewife by the name of Elizabeth Steen caused a near panic with her prediction that a series of catastrophic earthquakes would destroy the coastal area of California on April 14 of that year. It is reported that some 10,000 people gathered in downtown San Francisco at 5:10 a. m. on that day. When nothing happened, many made obscene gestures toward the sky.

Jeane Dixon, who has been acclaimed as a prophetess with an "extraordinary ability to see into the future," predicts in her popular book *The Call to Glory*, "The years 2020-2037, approximately, hail the true Second Coming of Christ."<sup>xxi</sup>

All of such attempts to lift the veil of the future and to probe the mysteries of God's secret counsels are evidence of the Old Adam's insatiable curiosity and intolerable presumption. The following which such false prophets often attract and the substantial financial profits which they often reap testify to the inherent gullibility of natural man.

False hopes are raised by the date-setters and millennialists of various kinds. The term "millennium" is taken from Revelation 20, where the Apostle John speaks of believers who "lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years" (v. 4). A millennium is a thousand years. Millennialists, who are also known as chiliasts, a name derived from the Greek word for "thousand," believe that a period of universal peace and prosperity lasting a thousand years will precede the end.

A study of the context of this passage reveals, however, that John is describing a vision that he had of the entire New Testament age. It is not possible for us to enter into all the details of this instructive prophecy here, but it is relevant to our discussion to note that John is speaking in symbolical, figurative language. He says, for example, "I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time" (vv. 1-3).

It is clear that the angel who seized the devil and bound him for a thousand years is none other than our Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus, as we see from the first chapter of this book, has the keys of hell and death (Rev. 1:19). By His sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection He has effectively bound Satan (Mt. 12:28, 29; Lk. 10: 18,19; Jn. 16:11; Col. 2:15; 1 Jn. 3:8, cf. Gn. 3:15).

The devil, Scripture tells us, is a spirit, a fallen angel. Obviously, he cannot be bound with a chain of iron or steel. Neither does hell have brass doors that are opened and closed with a large brass key.

John is describing what he saw in a vision. It would be a serious mistake, therefore, to understand the pictures he paints literally. The key and chain represent Christ's glorious victory by which He freed us from the power of the devil and closed the gates to death and hell. Those who believe in Him share in the spoils of His victory. He has made them to be kings and priests, who live and reign with Him in His spiritual, heavenly kingdom (1 Pe. 2:9; Re. 1:6).

The thousand years, thus, represent the entire period of the New Testament. Ten is the number of completion, and it is here raised to be the third power to indicate that this period is complete in every respect. Even millennialists who argue that the thousand years must be understood literally, have to admit that a completely literal interpretation of everything in this passage leads to absurdity.

Millennialists are divided into two schools, the premillennialists and the postmillennialists. Postmillennialists hold that Christ will return at the end of the thousand years. Postmillennialism has virtually died out, however, since World War II; because it does not appear that the world is moving toward a golden age of universal peace and Christian supremacy. But premillennialism, the view that Christ will return and the millennium will then follow, is more popular now than ever and is preached by its proponents with evangelistic fervor.

A glance at almost any issue of Billy Graham's magazine, *Decision*, will reveal, for example, that premillennialism has a prominent place in his doctrinal system. The best seller by Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, to mention another example, is a highly sensational piece of premillennialistic propaganda. In three years it went through 30 printings and sold nearly 2.5 million copies.

What, more specifically, do premillennialists believe? They are not by any means unanimously agreed on all details of this doctrine, but there is a general consensus among them that the Lord Jesus Christ will come part way down from heaven, raise those who have died in faith, and secretly snatch them together with His living believers away to meet Him in the air. Seven years after the so-called rapture. He will descend visibly to begin His worldwide reign of righteousness and peace that will have its center in Jerusalem and will last for a thousand years. All the promises made to ancient Israel concerning the Promised Land will then be literally fulfilled. At the end of the thousand years Satan, who had been bound during this time, will be

loosed for a brief period. A great battle will be fought at Armageddon between his forces and Christ's after which the rest of the dead will be raised and the final judgment will take place.

It is obvious from this brief sketch that premillennialism contradicts the teachings of the Bible in several crucial respects. It teaches a double resurrection, one just before and another at the end of the millennium. Jesus, however, speaks of only a single resurrection when He says in John 5:28,29: "The time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice [that is the voice of the Son of Man] and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned." Premillennialism, furthermore, teaches a twofold return of Christ, whereas the Bible knows of only one (He. 9:28) With its fantasy of Christ's visible reign on earth premillennialism also denies His emphatic assertion, "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn. 18:36). And, finally, in the premillennialist scheme of things the end will not actually come like a thief in the night, but predictably, at the end of the thousand years.

The errors of millennialism in its various forms are dangerous and destructive in a number of ways. The hopes of millennialists are diverted from the glory of life with Christ in heaven to the glory of life in a millennial kingdom here on earth. Their hopes are carnal and earthly, instead of spiritual and heavenly. Furthermore, the peace that Jesus gives us through the forgiveness of our sins, the peace that He obtained for us by shedding His holy, precious blood, the peace of which He speaks when He says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you" (Jn. 14:27) —that peace is not fully appreciated. And finally, the opiate of millennialism lulls its adherents into a false sense of security. They are led to believe that the end of the world will not come for at least a thousand years. There is no need, therefore to take the Lord's warnings to watch seriously—at least not just yet.

But Jesus said what He meant and meant what He said when He warned, "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap" (Lk. 21:34).

As constant reminders of the approaching end, Jesus has given us various signs. The destruction of Jerusalem, as previously mentioned, prefigured the end and marked its beginning. Jesus predicted this awesome judgment of God on the holy city as He approached it for His Passion. When He saw the city from the Mount of Olives, "he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.'" (Luke 19:41-44).

The Jewish historian Josephus has detailed the horrors as the lightning of God's wrath struck the city when the Jews attempted to throw off the hated imperial yoke. In the year 70 the Roman general Titus laid siege to Jerusalem. The city's population was swollen with refugees from the surrounding area. A plague broke out, and thousands died. Hundreds tried to escape, but the Romans caught and crucified as many as five hundred a day. Hunger stalked the streets of the doomed city, and mothers became cannibals of their own children.

Finally, the Romans captured the castle of Antonia. A torch was put to the temple, and the hill on which it stood was carpeted with corpses' as a river of blood ran down its slopes. Over a million people were either killed or died of starvation or disease. A hundred thousand were carried away as prisoners of war. The Roman soldiers planted their eagles on the smoldering ruins, offered sacrifices to their gods, and proclaimed Titus *Imperator*. Such was the



horrible fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy concerning the abomination of desolation in the holy place to which Jesus alluded in Matthew 24:15.

To this day, in fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy (Luke 21:24), the Jews are scattered among all nations. Millennialists cheered when the modern state of Israel was established on May 14, 1948. They suppose this to be one of the events ushering in the millennium. But there is no such prophecy in the Bible. The streaming of the nations to Mt. Zion of which Isaiah speaks is a prophecy of the coming of the Gentiles into the Christian church (Isa. 2:2,3; Heb. 12:22,23). The prophets' picturesque prophecies of peace (Isa. 2:4; 11:6-9; Mic. 4:3,4) are fulfilled in the peace on earth proclaimed by the angel at Jesus' birth.

The remaining signs which Jesus mentions as signaling the approaching end can be catalogued in three groups. There will be signs in nature, in the world, and in the church.

What are the signs in the realm of nature? In Luke 21:11 Jesus says, "There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven."

Earthquakes serve to impress on man his utter helplessness in the face of the violent forces of nature. Statisticians report that in this century alone one million people have died in earthquakes and their attendant fires and floods.<sup>xxii</sup>

The worst earthquake in recorded history occurred in China in 1556 when more than 800,000 people were killed. In 1923 some 200,000 lost their lives in an earthquake that destroyed Tokyo and Yokohama in Japan. In 1906 San Francisco, 1964 Alaska and California, and 1971 San Fernando earthquakes each resulted in damages in excess of a half billion dollars.<sup>xxiii</sup> The 30 major earthquakes that occur each year are dramatic reminders that the end of the world is rapidly approaching.<sup>xxiv</sup>

We who live in the United States, a land flowing, veritably with milk and honey, are often unaware that other parts of the world are suffering from famine. All of us were affected, however, when our country last year sold 700 million bushels of wheat abroad because of crop failures and shortages overseas. As a result, food costs rose appreciably, and our nation's reserve stocks were dangerously lowered. An article in the July 1974 issue of *The Reader's Digest*, entitled "Ominous Changes in the World's Weather,"<sup>xxv</sup> reports that "unknown thousands of persons have died of famine in well-publicized droughts south of the Sahara." But it also states that "this drought belt is part of a much larger dry-weather pattern extending all the way through the Middle East to India, South Asia and North China. Drought has struck Central America as well."

From time to time there have been severe droughts with resulting famines throughout the world since the days of Jesus. The potato famine in Ireland resulted in the death of a million persons within five years (1846-1851), and was responsible for the emigration of 1.5 million people during the following decade.<sup>xxvi</sup> The drought and dust storms that swept the Great Plains in the nineteen thirties are still recalled. Some food shortages are produced by the greed or foolishness of man. Government policies that have restricted food production in order to raise prices and superstitious religious practices in India are cases in point.

Disastrous epidemics have in the course of history swept through cities and across entire countries and continents, virtually wiping out the population of some regions. The catalogue of disasters and catastrophes in *The New York Times Encyclopedic Almanac* records the death of millions as the result of epidemics of bubonic plague, typhus, smallpox, yellow fever, diphtheria, cholera, and other dread diseases. Many of us have probably been touched by epidemics of some kind of flu. Have we been reminded at such a time of the end of all things?

Additional signs in the realm of nature are mentioned by Jesus: “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” (Luke 21:25, 26).

Eclipses, meteors, comets, sunspots, and other sometimes inexplicable portents in the heavens point to the eventual suspension, as implied in the promise God made to Noah, of the regular cycle of the seasons and the fixed succession of day and night. Typhoons and tidal waves, hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods—all these manifestations of nature’s brute force are righteous judgments of God. For the ungodly they constitute a well-deserved punishment. For those Christians who are affected by them they serve as a wholesome chastisement, teaching them to “humble themselves under God’s mighty hand” (1 Peter 5:6).

The second type of sign to which Jesus points consists of various indicators in the world foreboding the end. The foundations of human society will collapse as the end approaches.

“When you hear of wars and revolutions,” Jesus told His disciples, “do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.’ Then he said to them: ‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom’ ” (Luke 21:9,10). *U. S. News & World Report* lists 128 wars that were waged in the 70 years between 1898 and 1968.<sup>xxvii</sup> Of these the most deadly was World War II, which brought death to nearly 17 million military personnel and to more than 34 million civilians.<sup>xxviii</sup> Reports of wars and rumors of wars leap at us daily from the pages of our newspapers. The world lives in perpetual fear of the mushroom cloud as the number of nations possessing the means to unleash a thermonuclear holocaust multiplies.

Jesus describes the last days as a time marked by “the increase of wickedness” (Matt. 24:12). Paul likewise warns Timothy, “There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:1-5). It almost seems as if Paul had been reading *Time* or *Newsweek*!

When the moral law, which has been inscribed on the heart of man by God, no longer functions as a curb to restrain his evil desires, society, which is built on the foundation of law, totters on the brink of collapse. Anarchy is inevitable when every one does what is right in his own eyes (Judges 17:6). We are witnessing the fulfillment of the prophecy of Enoch, the seventh from Adam, who, as Jude informs us, prophesied: “See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly acts they have done in their ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him” (vv. 14, 15). Ungodliness—a form of the word is mentioned four times in this passage—is the distinctive characteristic of our day.

We are living in an age of humanism, hedonism, and paganism. Humanism makes man the measure of all things. Man declares, “God is dead!” and announces in the words of Henley’s *Invictus*, “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.” Humanism is the deification of man.

Hedonism makes pleasure the goal of life. “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32; Isa. 22:13) was the philosophy of the ancient Epicureans. It is, by and large, the philosophy of twentieth century man.

Paganism makes evil into good. The shocking feature of the new paganism that characterizes our society is that such transgressions of God's law as adultery and abortion are not only no longer condemned, but are openly advocated and defended. Fornication is committed in the name of "love," and abortion-on-demand is declared to be a woman's basic right. According to *U. S. News & World Report*, since abortion within certain broad limits has been legalized in the United States, the number of legal, recorded abortions has risen to a horrifying 700,000 per year!<sup>xxxix</sup>

The "new morality," also called "situation ethics," is justified by the new paganism as being actually a higher form of morality. Peter is describing propagandists of such perversion when he says that "they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him" (2 Peter 2:18, 19). Christians, he says, who have escaped the corruption of the world but then are again entangled in it "are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning" (2 Peter 2:20). Christian young people who are seduced by the satanic arguments of the advocates of situation ethics are tragic examples of Peter's proverbs, "A dog returns to its vomit," and "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud" (2 Peter 2:22). Jesus' prophecy that "because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold," (Matt. 24:12) is being fulfilled before our very eyes.

*Time* a few years ago carried a cover story with the title, "The Adulterous Generation." It presented a shocking account of the sordid immorality that pervades our anything-goes society. Premarital chastity is becoming virtually passé.<sup>xxx</sup> Marriage itself is increasingly considered, as the youth idols Mick Jagger and John Lennon have declared, "obsolete."<sup>xxxi</sup> The divorce rate zooms upward as couples contract marriage with the vow to live together, not as long as they both shall live, but only as long as they both shall love. According to the U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, in 1970 2,179,000 marriages were recorded and 600,000 divorces.<sup>xxxii</sup> X-rated movies, pornographic books and magazines, nudity on the stage and the beach, "gay" liberation, promiscuity and perversion—all are part and parcel of our sex-oriented, sick society that prides itself on being "open" and avant-garde.

The erosion of marriage inevitably undermines the home. The family is the very cornerstone of the social order. Progressive education, sponsored by the disciples of John Dewey, who held that there are no fixed moral laws and no eternal truths, has produced a generation of permissive parents and undisciplined, rebellious children. "Freedom" is the watchword of the day. But liberty without discipline spells license. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the crime rate in the United States has skyrocketed 119 percent in a decade, mushrooming nine times as fast as the population growth.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Violence and vandalism, robbery and rape make life in our cities unsafe for every age. Many city dwellers huddle in fear behind locked doors and drawn shades. Corruption in high places breeds contempt for the law among citizens on every level. Unrestrained greed has spawned a spiraling, worldwide inflation that threatens to plunge mankind into a disastrous depression.

While some 5.5 million disillusioned pleasure-seekers in the U. S. have become alcoholics, millions of others have turned to marijuana, heroin, cocaine, LSD, and other drugs in a continual search for new thrills. Contemporary philosophers like Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre contend that life is meaningless and absurd. Others draw the practical conclusion from such a philosophy of despair and seek escape through suicide.

Ironically, an age that boasts of its scientific and technological progress and that rejects Christianity as a relic of primitive pagan superstition, is turning increasingly to astrology, witchcraft, and Satanism. How effectively Satan, “the god of this age,” has “blinded the minds of unbelievers” (2 Cor. 4:4)!

Jesus warned, “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am Christ,’ and will deceive many” (Matt. 24:4,5). Again He predicted, “Many false prophets will appear and deceive many peoples” (Matt. 24:11). They will even, He says, “perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible” (Matt. 24:24). But that is not possible, and God in His grace will shorten the last terrible days of distress for His elect’s sake. Otherwise no one would survive (Matt. 24:22).

Josephus reports that prior to the destruction of Jerusalem a continual succession of false prophets and Messiahs incited the Jews, one of whom attracted some 30,000 followers. The parade has continued without interruption to the present day. We need only recall such self-appointed prophets as Mohammed, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young of the Mormons, Mary Baker Eddy of Christian Science, Russell and Rutherford of Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the popular gurus and swamis like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi who peddle their promises of peace of mind and mystical union with God through transcendental meditation. Millions upon millions of unwary naive people are deceived by such charlatans, just as Jesus foretold.

As one considers all these manifestations of Satan’s activity, the conviction grows that we are living in that “short time” when, according to John’s prophecy, Satan would be released from his prison to go out and deceive the nations (Rev. 20:3, 7, 8). *Satan Is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* is the perceptive title of another book recently published by Hal Lindsey. There can be little argument about that observation.

Obvious as Satan’s activity is in the world at large, it is even more apparent and even more damaging and destructive within the visible Christian church itself. And this too belongs to the signs of the last times.

Many antichristian prophets and preachers had appeared even in the days of the apostles. John writes, “Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour” (1 John 2:18).

It is noteworthy that John makes a clear distinction between the many antichrists and one preeminent Antichrist. The prophet Daniel prophesied of the coming of this Arch-antichrist, but it is Paul who gives us the fullest picture of him in his Second Letter to the Thessalonians, chapter two. There we read (vv. 3-12):

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. He opposes and exalts himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, and even sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God. Don’t you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil

that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

This prophecy has been fulfilled, of course, in the Roman papacy. As the love of Christians for the truth of the Gospel cooled, the papacy fastened its icy tentacles ever more firmly on the hearts and consciences of men. Seated thus in the very temple of God, the pope insisted, in the words of the infamous bull *Unam Sanctam* issued by Boniface VIII in 1302, that “it is altogether necessary for salvation to be subject to the Roman pontiff.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Rome’s antichristianity came to a climax when the Council of Trent shortly after Luther’s death pronounced a solemn curse on anyone who teaches that a man is justified by grace alone through faith in Christ Jesus.<sup>xxxv</sup> With our Lutheran Confessions we hold, therefore, “that the pope is the very Antichrist.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> For us this is no mere historical judgment; it is an article of faith. The Bible itself presents to us the marks by which the Antichrist is to be recognized, and the fingerprints are those of the Roman papacy. In the decrees of Trent it hardened itself against the Gospel and is since then irreformable. It may alter its image, as it did in the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), as a result of which, for example, the mass is now said in English, but in essence it is *semper eadem*. Although it suffered a mortal wound in the Lutheran Reformation, it will continue, as Paul indicates, until the Lord Jesus Himself finally destroys it at the brightness of His coming.

Jesus gives a further sign of the approaching end by warning His disciples that persecutions will come: “They will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will save yourselves” (Luke 21:12-19).

According to tradition, all of the apostles, with the exception of John, suffered a martyr’s death. Beginning with the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who was stoned in the year 37, the pages of history are stained with the blood of faithful believers. But the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church. The story of Saul, the Christians’ bitterest enemy who became the great apostle to the Gentiles, has been repeated through the centuries. Saul had witnessed Stephen’s heroism and the glory of Christ in his dying face.

Sad to say, however, there have also been many instances of the fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy, “At that time many will turn away from the faith” (Matt. 24:10). By God’s grace, we here in the United States have been spared the ordeal of being thrown to the lions, crucified, or tortured on the rack because of our faith. But such times may come. Surely the prayer of every one of us is that of the hymn writer:

Would to God that I might even  
As the martyred saints of old,  
With the helping hand of Heaven,  
Steadfast stand in battle bold!

O my God, I pray Thee,  
In the combat stay me.  
Grant that I may ever be  
Loyal, staunch, and true to Thee. (TLH, 470:4)

Increasing apostasy is, according to the Lord's Word, a mark of the last times. Not only did Jesus foretell this, but the Apostle Paul likewise tells Timothy, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons" (1 Tim. 4:1).

In large segments of the Christian church today modern theology has mounted the podium and the pulpit. In the first part of this essay the radical theology of some leading, nominally Christian teachers was briefly sketched. They echo Pilate's sneering question, "What is truth?" (John 18:36). They insist that all theological propositions, even those taken directly from the Bible, are only relatively true. These are no absolutes. No statement can be said to contain the truth or give adequate expression to it. <sup>xxxvii</sup>

Only too often the contemporary church offers starving sinners, not the wholesome food of the Gospel of Christ, but the dry husks of the social gospel. A better life here on earth has replaced eternal life in heaven as the object of its concern. It expends its energy in campaigning for improved housing in the inner city, equal rights for minorities, higher living standards, the abolition of war, social justices and women's liberation

Harvard's Harvey Cox has written a book called *The Secular City*. His city has two identifying marks: profanity and pragmatism. Profanity means that man "come of age" has put away any childish dependence on God. His salvation is to be found in this world and is achieved by man himself. Pragmatism means that politics and social reform are the means for creating a perfect society. Henry Emerson Fosdick, an articulate spokesman for modernism who died in 1969, expressed the same thought in these words, "The kingdom is not something which comes down from heaven, but which is to be worked at among men." <sup>xxxviii</sup>

That the Lutheran Church has not been immune to the pernicious cancer of modern theology the struggle that is racking The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod tragically demonstrates. Even more tragic, however is the fact that in the American Lutheran Church and in the Lutheran Church in America there is no struggle. The new theology is firmly entrenched. We on our part dare not think that our Wisconsin Synod could never fall victim to the menace of modernism! We have an Old Adam too, and he is a citizen of Cox's secular city!

As a final sign of His Second Coming Jesus says, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached to the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). Just before His ascension He commissioned His disciples to be His witnesses and sent them into all the world to preach the good news of their redemption to all people. He charged them to make disciples of all nations because He sincerely "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). The vast majority, sad to say, do not want His salvation. And yet God has in Christ elected some "before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight" (Eph. 1:4). When the last of these elect has heard the Gospel and has been brought to faith, then—and only then—the end will come.

In reviewing the Lord's Word concerning the signs of the end of all things, we have not, of course, said anything new. And yet it is well for us to be reminded of these signs that we might be more aware of them and prepared at all times for that last great day. That brings us to the final part of our discussion: the Lord's Word concerning

### III. THE PROPER PREPARATION FOR THE END OF ALL THINGS

History demonstrates that all the signs of the end in the Lord's long list have already occurred. Not a one has not been fulfilled in some way. The destruction of Jerusalem has taken place. The signs in nature, in the world, and in the church are in unmistakable evidence on every side. The Antichrist has appeared and in the Reformation suffered the setback which Paul foretold. The Gospel has been preached in all the world as a testimony to all nations. In fact, Scripture shows that this sign was fulfilled already in the days of the apostles. Paul tells the Romans that the voice of the messengers of the Gospel "has gone out into all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world" (Rom. 10:18). He tells the Colossians likewise that the Gospel they have heard and of which Paul is a servant "has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven" (Col. 1:23).

Consequently, Paul and the other apostles speak of the Lord's Second Coming as a real possibility within their own lifetime. Paul tells the Thessalonians that on that day first of all those who have died in Christ will rise. After that—and here, significantly, he uses the present tense – "we who *are still alive* and *are left* will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess. 4:17). He reminds the Romans, "Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed" (Rom. 13:11). He addresses the Corinthians as people who "eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed" (1 Cor. 1:7) and on whom "the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10:11). "Brothers," he says, "the time is short" (1 Cor. 7:29). He points out to Titus that the grace of God enables us to live a godly life in this present age "while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). All this is language that reflects the spirit of a man who is living in constant expectation and joyful anticipation of his Savior's return.

John speaks similarly. In a passage cited earlier in another connection he writes, "Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18).

The inspired writer of the Letter to the Hebrews likewise anticipates the end and in that light admonishes, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:25). He predicts, "In just a very little while, 'He who is coming will come and will not be late'" (Heb. 10:37).

James urges, "Be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near" (James 5:8), and Peter announces, "The end of all things is near" (1 Peter 4:7). It is true that many of the signs were not fulfilled in the apostles' day to the extent and in the degree in which they have subsequently been in evidence. It may also be that an even richer and fuller fulfillment still lies in the future. But this we do not know!

We need to take to heart, therefore, Jesus' admonition to His disciples in His Olivet address, "Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" (Matt. 24:42). "Watch!" is the repeated exhortation also of the apostles (Act 20:31; 1 Cor. 16:13; Col. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:6; 2 Tim. 4:5; 1 Peter 4:7; Rev. 3:2). Thus it is clear that our Lord's Word bids us to live in constant watchfulness. *Semper paratus* is the motto not only of the U. S. Coast Guard; it is the Christian's motto.

In one of his visions recorded in the Book of Revelation John hears the Lord Jesus say, "Behold, I come like a thief. Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so

that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed” (Rev. 16:15). What Jesus means is that we are to make certain at all times that we are dressed in the robe of His perfect righteousness. Clothed in that garment through faith, we need not fear that we will have to stand before God on the Day of Judgment in the shame and nakedness of our sins. Those who have put on that spotless robe and take constant care that Satan does not rob them of it can joyfully exclaim with Isaiah of old, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels” (Isa. 61:10).

To that end Christians will daily nourish their faith by reading and meditating on God’s Word. They will regularly assemble in Christian worship to encourage, admonish, and strengthen one another and to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Through these channels of God’s grace the Holy Spirit will continually replenish the oil in their lamps of faith so that the flame burns brightly in constant readiness for the heavenly Bridegroom’s coming. What a warning example Jesus presents in the five foolish virgins who were not prepared when the Bridegroom came! They had failed to make use of the means of grace. “Open the door for us!” was their cry when they belatedly arrived at the banquet hall. But the Bridegroom replied, “I tell you the truth, I don’t know you” (Matt. 25:11, 12).

Prayer constitutes another vital part of the Christian’s preparation for the end of all things. How readily our Old Adam supplies us with excuses for neglecting to pray! We are too busy. We don’t have the time. We have more important things to do. What hollow excuses these all are!

When such thoughts suggest themselves to us, it would be well for us to recall Jesus’ words, “Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36). Paul likewise exhorts, “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful” (Col. 4:2). Peter, also joins to his reminder that the end of all things is near the admonition, “Be clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray” (1 Peter 4:7).

His words draw our attention to yet another aspect of proper preparation for the end and our Lord’s return—living a sanctified Christian life. Jesus warns, “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth” (Luke 21:34, 35).

We Christians are living in the world. We are in constant danger of again becoming a part of the world. The spirit of the ungodly world that surrounds us is more contagious than the flu. It is a pollution that pervades the air like a London (or Manitowoc) fog. It penetrates the doors and windows of our homes and lives. Every channel on TV carries the world’s commercials into our living room. What a powerful mind-bender that spell-binding box is for us—and for our children! At an estimated 20 hours per week, a youth by the time he graduates from high school has watched more than 15, 000 hours of television.

Many young people become so hardened by the steady diet of robbery, assault, murder, suicide, torture, adultery, immodesty, and other sins that are so fascinatingly presented on the TV tube that such sins no longer shock them. Their consciences have become callused. Through this and other mass media they have imbibed the philosophy of the world in massive doses. It has been drummed into their souls by the lurid lyrics and steady beat of the counter-culture’s acid rock.



We Christians can not isolate our children from the world, but we can arm them against the world. Christian education on every level is the key. Daily instruction in God's Word will equip them with the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:16, 17). It will strengthen them to heed the admonition of James to keep themselves "from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27). It will remind them that they have been bought with a price and will motivate them to live in keeping with their high calling as children of God.

Paul encourages the Thessalonian Christians to remember who they are. "But you, brothers," he says, "are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet" (1 Thess. 5:1-8).

Peter stresses the same thought and, pointing to the approaching destruction of all things, asks, "What kind of people ought you to be?" He answers his own question: "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming" (2 Peter 3:1, 12). "Make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him," he adds (v. 14). Finally he concludes this Letter, in which he has painted such a vivid picture of the last times and the last day, with the admonition, "Be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:17, 18).

Every passing day brings us another day closer to the end. We would be misapplying this truth, however, were we to quit our jobs, pack our bags, sit down with folded hands, and do nothing but wait. Some of the Thessalonians made this mistake. They refused to work. They expected others to feed them. Paul rebukes them sharply: "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command and urge such people to settle down and earn the bread they eat" (2 Thess. 3:12). "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" is the rule that applies to people of that kind (v. 10). In other words, proper preparation for the end includes faithfully fulfilling the responsibilities of our calling in life. It means that in thankful love we will joyfully serve God and our fellow man, doing all that we do to God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31).

All of us who are disciples of Jesus Christ have a special calling in life, whether we are pastors, teachers, or lay people. We are His witnesses. To share the Gospel-joy that fills our hearts is as natural for us as it is for the sun to shine or a spring to flow. It is an axiom that "out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34). Recognizing this, Jesus told His disciples in His parting words before He ascended into heaven, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Act 1:8). This was not a command; it was a statement of fact. Jesus did not use the imperative here; He used the future tense.

God used persecution to make this mission outreach a reality. He permitted the congregation at Jerusalem to be harassed at the hands of Saul of Tarsus. The Christians fled for their lives. But "those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went" (Act 8:4). Like Peter and John, who refused to be silenced when the Jewish Sanhedrin tried to intimidate them (Act 4:20), these Christian men and women could not help speaking about what they had seen and heard.

Will not that same joy in the Gospel prompt us to supply the manpower and the money to enable our Synod to enter the many doors of opportunity the Lord is opening for us? The

challenge is great, the hour late. Less than a third of the world's 3.5 billion people is even nominally Christian, and the percentage of professing Christians is not keeping pace with the growth in the world's population. Christian missions, generally, are in retreat. But God has been blessing our Home and World mission program with unprecedented growth and success.

It is true that we who belong to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod number less than one hundredth of one per cent of the inhabitants on the face of the earth. But surely we will not permit ourselves to be discouraged by the vastness of the field and the smallness of our Synod! The Lord only asks us to sow the seed of His Word; He does not ask us to produce the fruits. He is extending the world's time of grace because He is patient, "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

The angels whom Jesus sent to His disciples from His throne in the heavens after a cloud had hidden His ascending body from their sight rebuked them sharply: "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky?" (Act 1:11). The implication was clear: Get busy! You have work to do! We, too, need to work while it is day; "night is coming when no one can work" (John 9:4). Being properly prepared for the Lord's Second Coming does not mean being sky-watchers, but seed sowers!

When the Jews returned to their homeland after the Babylonian Captivity, they began to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. But their enemies tried to halt the reconstruction. So the workmen worked with one hand while holding a weapon in the other (Neh. 4:17).

We, too, must wage a battle as we build. By God's grace we have received a priceless heritage from our fathers. We have the Gospel in its pristine purity and unadulterated truth. For 125 years we have enjoyed its blessings. But unless we guard this treasure carefully, we will lose it. Jude bids us "to contend for the faith that God has once for all entrusted to the saints" (v 3), and John urges, "Hold on to what you have so that no one will take your crown" (Rev. 3:11).

A gift of God that we often overlook is the gift of unity. We in our Synod are not divided into opposing camps contending for contradictory theologies. The faculty of our Seminary is of one heart and mind. In all of our Synod's worker training schools young men and women are prepared for the preaching or teaching ministry by instructors who are wholly committed to the Holy Scriptures as the sole authority and norm in all matters of faith and life. This is a blessing we dare not take for granted. Unity can not be manufactured; it can only be created by the Holy Ghost. Let us thank God for this gift!

Like our Synod, our nation is also preparing to celebrate a milestone in its history, the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence. The forefathers of our country who signed that document valued their liberty so highly that for its defense they declared, "We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor. "

You and I are the people of God. We are citizens of heaven. In the Gospel we possess the truth that makes us truly free. We value our American heritage of political and religious liberty, but our Christian heritage of spiritual liberty is far more precious. By His perfect life and vicarious death Christ has won for us and for all men perpetual freedom from the tyranny of Satan, sin, and death. Will we not dedicate our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor to preserve and extend that incomparable freedom?

There can be little doubt that we are living in the last days. The signs of which the Lord's Word speaks fill men's hearts with fear. But should we be afraid? Has not our Savior Himself said to us, "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28)? What comfort lies in those words! Our redemption is drawing near with all that it holds in store for us—endless life, endless joy, endless glory! That is

Jesus' promise. "He who testifies these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon'" "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" Amen. (Rev. 22:20).

## ENDNOTES

1. New Testament passages in this essay are cited according to the *New International Version*. Old Testament passages are cited according to the *King James Version*.
2. Cf. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), III:542, for a quotation from Luther.
3. Julian Huxley, *Religion Without Revelation* (New York: Mentor, 1957), pp. 58f and p. 62.
4. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), I:245.
5. John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963)
6. John A. T. Robinson, *In the End God* (New York, Evanston, London: Harper & Row, 1968) pp. 17, 18.
7. John A. T. Robinson, *The New Reformation?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), p. 107.
8. *In the End God*, p. 24.
9. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1967), pp. 195f.
10. *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 186.
11. Cf. John Wesley White, *Reentry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), p. 9.
12. J. Schoneberg Setzer, *What's Left to Believe?* (Nashville, New York: Abingdon, 1968).
13. Setzer, p. 157.
14. Setzer, p. 165.
15. Setzer, pp. 165f.
16. Setzer, p. 166.
17. Setzer, pp. 169f.
18. Setzer, p. 170.
19. Setzer, p. 141.
20. White, p. 15.
21. Jeane Dixon, *The Call to Glory* (New York: William Morrow, 1971), p. 181.
22. Cf. Salem Kirban, *How the World Will End* (Huntingdon Valley, Pa., 1968), p. 119.
23. *The New York Times Encyclopedic Almanac*, 1972, p. 333.
24. White, p. 54.
25. Pp. 188ff.
26. *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14<sup>th</sup> edition (1929), Vol. 12, p. 612.
27. Kirban, p. 75.
28. Kirban, p. 253.
29. U.S. News & World Report, March 4, 1974.
30. Cf. White, p. 75.
31. White, p. 78.
32. *The New York Times Encyclopedic Almanac*, 1972, p. 494; White, p. 76.
33. White, p. 61.
27. Kirban, p. 75.
28. Kirban, p. 253.
29. U.S. News & World Report, March 4, 1974.
30. Cf. White, p. 75.

31. White, p. 78.
32. *The New York Times Encyclopedic Almanac*, 1972, p. 494; White, p. 76.
33. White, p. 61.
34. Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev. Luth. Dogmatik* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1909) IVL223.
35. Sess. VI, Can. 11.
36. Sm. Art., Part II, Art. IV, 10; Trig., 475.
37. Cf. Warren Quanbeck, quoted in Herman Otten, *Baal Or God?* (New Haven, Mo.: Leader, 1965), p. 9.
38. White, p. 25.

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<sup>i</sup> New Testament passages in this essay are cited according to the *New International Version*. Old Testament passages are cited according to the *King James Version*.

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), III:542, for a quotation from Luther.

<sup>iii</sup> Julian Huxley, *Religion Without Revelation* (New York: Mentor, 1957), pp.58f and p. 62.

<sup>iv</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), I:245

<sup>v</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963)

<sup>vi</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *In the End God* (New York, Evanston, London: Harper & Row, 1968) pp. 17,18

<sup>vii</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *The New Reformation?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965) p. 107.

<sup>viii</sup> *In the End God* , p. 24.

<sup>ix</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 1967), pp. 195f.

<sup>x</sup> *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 186.

<sup>xi</sup> Cf. John Wesley White, *Reentry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), p. 9

<sup>xii</sup> J. Schoneberg Setzer, *What's Left to Believe?* (Nashville, New York: Abingdon, 1968).

<sup>xiii</sup> Setzer, p. 157.

<sup>xiv</sup> Setzer, p. 165

<sup>xv</sup> Setzer, p. 165f.

<sup>xvi</sup> Setzer, p. 166.

<sup>xvii</sup> Setzer, pp. 169f.

<sup>xviii</sup> Setzer, p. 170.

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<sup>xix</sup> Setzer, p. 141.

<sup>xx</sup> White, p. 15.

<sup>xxi</sup> Jeane Dixon, *The Call to Glory* (New York: William Morrow, 1971), p. 181

<sup>xxii</sup> Cf. Salem Kirban, *How the World Will End* (Huntingdon Valley, Pa., 1968), p. 119.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *The New York Encyclopedic Almanac, 1972*, p. 333

<sup>xxiv</sup> White, p. 54 .

<sup>xxv</sup> Pp. 188ff.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th edition (1929), Vol. 12, p. 612.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Kirban, p. 75.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Kirban, p. 253.

<sup>xxix</sup> U. S. News & World Report, March 4, 1974.

<sup>xxx</sup> Cf. White, p. 75

<sup>xxxi</sup> White, p. 78

<sup>xxxii</sup> *The New York Times Encyclopedic Almanac, 1972*, p. 494; White, p. 76.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> White, p. 61.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev. Luth. Dogmatik* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1909) IVL 223,

<sup>xxxv</sup> Sess. VI, Can. 11.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Sm. Art., Part II, Art. IV, 10; Trig., 475

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Cf. Cf. Warren Quanbeck, quoted in Herman Otten, *Baal Or God?* (New Haven, Mo.: Leader, 1965), p. 9.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> White, p. 25