

# **The Imminency of Christ's Return**

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Could Jesus return at any moment? Or are there events which need to take place first before the second coming?

Should we live and work each day with the conviction that it may be the world's last day? Or should we live and work with the thought that judgment day, though near, could not happen today?

Needless to say, these are questions which carry large-scale implications for our lives and work as Christians. These are questions upon which we as members of sister synods need to agree if we are to teach and work in harmony.

This paper will pursue the topic of the imminency of Christ's return. Could Christ return at any moment? It is hoped that we, as a result, will be strengthened in our Bible-based fellowship. It is hoped that we will leave all the more united in a common outlook toward our life and work based on God's Word.

## **I. The New Testament Perspective on the Time of the Second Coming**

### **A. God has anointed the day**

According to the New Testament, the time of judgment day has been fixed by God. God has appointed or determined the day, and it is not subject to change. In his sermon to the Athenians, Paul says, "He [God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed" (Ac 17:31). Paul elsewhere says that we should judge nothing "before the appointed time" (1 Co 4:5). The appearing of Jesus is something "which God will bring about in his own time" (1 Ti 6:15). In his last words before his ascension Jesus speaks about "the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" (Ac 1:7).

Curiously Peter says that we as Christians can "speed" the coming of Christ in 2 Pe 3:12 (if the word is to be translated this way). He apparently is referring to our mission work and our prayers which God has built into his timetable. Judgment day will come when the full number of the elect has been converted. As God uses us to convert people, from our perspective, then, we are making judgment day closer. When we pray for judgment day to come, we are "hastening" the coming of the day because God has built these prayers into his plan, and he will answer them.

### **B. The day is known only to God**

God in his grace does not reveal the day and hour of Christ's return to human beings. Jesus says, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" (Ac 1:7). God knows that such knowledge would not be good for people. God wants the end to be unknown so that we will be ready at all times. Jesus says, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" (Mt 24:42).

The angels in heaven also do not know the time of judgment day. Even Christ while he was on earth said that he did not know the time of judgment day. "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mt 24:36). This was said by Jesus in his state of humiliation when he as the God-man was not making full and constant use of his divine nature in respect to his human nature.

To illustrate the second coming, Christ compares our situation to that of workers on an estate when the owner has gone away. We don't know when the owner will return, so we must be ready at all times. "It's like a man going away: He leaves his house in charge of his servants, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back--whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn" (Mk 13:34-35; cf. also Mt 24:45-51; Lk 12:35-38; 42-46).

In the parable of the ten virgins Christ also compares his coming to that of a bridegroom coming at an unknown hour to take guests to the wedding banquet. The parable concludes, “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour” (Mt 25:1-13).

The New Testament frequently compares the second coming of Christ to the coming of a thief. What is highlighted in this comparison is the unexpected nature of the coming and also its suddenness. Jesus inaugurates the use of this comparison when he says, “if the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Mt 24:43-44). The comparison is also used by Paul (1 Th 5:1-3) by Peter (2 Pe 3:10), and by John (Rev 3:3; 16:15).

Christ makes clear that at his second coming people will be going about their normal earthly lives, unaware of the coming judgment. His second coming will be as unexpected as the coming of the flood. “As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left” (Mt 24:37-41). His coming will also be as unexpected as the destruction of Sodom (Lk 17:28-30).

It would be wrong to try to determine the date of Christ’s coming. The Bible clearly indicates that the date is unknown to man and that the coming will be unexpected.

### **C. The second coming is “near” and will happen “soon”**

The New Testament apostles consistently stress that the second coming is near. Christians should not think of the second coming as distant and remote. It is close; it is at hand. Paul says, “What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short... For this world in its present form is passing away” (1 Co 7:29-31). “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near” (Php 4:5). The writer to the Hebrews says, “For in just a little while, ‘he who is coming will come and will not delay’” (Heb 10:37). James says, “You, too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!” (Jas 5:8-9). Peter says, “The end of all things is near” (1 Pe 4:7).

In the book of Revelation, Jesus frequently says that he is coming soon (Rev 3:11; 22:7,12). It is interesting that the last words of Jesus in the Bible are these: “I am coming soon” (Rev. 22:20).

The apostles consistently encourage the Christians of their age to look forward to the second coming of Christ as if it were a possibility in their lifetimes. Paul says, “You do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed” (1 Co 1:7). “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ (Php 3:20). “You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven “ (1 Th 1:9-10). “The grace of God... teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness... while we wait for the blessed hope--the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Ti 2:11-13). The writer to the Hebrews says, “Let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the day approaching” (Heb 10:25). Other passages are Romans 8:23; 2 Timothy 4:8; Hebrews 9:28; 1 Peter 1:13; 1 John 2:28; Jude 21. Though the apostles did not know the time of judgment day, they assumed it was possible for judgment day to come during their lifetimes.

Paul also has the mind-set that each day brings judgment day one day closer. We are getting nearer and nearer to the second coming the longer the world stands. He can say, “Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed (Ro 13:11).

### **D. We are in the “last times” or “the last days” in the New Testament era**

In keeping with the viewpoint that the end is near, the New Testament also states that we are now in the “last times” or the “last days” of the world’s existence. The world was ushered into the “last days” with the first coming of Christ. “The last days” are the entire period between the first and second comings of Christ.

In his Pentecost sermon, Peter quoted Joel as saying “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people” (Ac 2:17). Peter takes this verse with its reference to the “last days” as finding fulfillment on Pentecost. The writer to the Hebrews says, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb 1:1-2). James rebukes the wealthy oppressors and says, “You have hoarded wealth in the last days” (Jas 5:3). Peter says that Jesus was revealed on earth “in these last times” (1 Pe 1:20). One could also note 1 Corinthians 10:11 and Hebrews 9:26.

Since we are presently in the “last days,” we do not expect another era to be set up prior to judgment day.

#### **E. Hints that judgment day may not come right away**

The testimony of God’s Word on the time of judgment day, however, is not all one-sided on the side of nearness. There are some hints of an extended period of time.

Though points of doctrine are not established by incidental details in the parables, yet it is interesting that several of Christ’s parables hint at an extended time before judgment day. In the parable of the ten virgins, the bridegroom “was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep” (Mt 25:5). In the parable of the talents, the owner returned “after a long time” (Mt 25:19). In the parable of the ten minas, the man of noble birth “went to a distant country to have himself appointed king” (Lk 19:12). This last parable actually was spoken to correct those who thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once (Lk 19:11).

In regard to his signs of the end, Jesus states that the end will not come immediately when the signs are first seen. The signs are the “beginning of birth pains” (Mt 24:8). Jesus says that wars and revolutions must happen first, “but the end will not come right away” (Lk 21:9).

The same apostles who speak of judgment day as near in numerous passages, in other passages write as if they expect their own death to happen first. Paul in 2 Timothy writes, “The time has come for my departure” (2 Ti 4:6). Paul can say that he desires to “depart and be with Christ” because “to die is gain” (Php 1:21-23). Peter, in speaking about the tent of his body, says, “I know that I will soon put it aside” (2 Pe 1:14).

The book of Revelation also carries hints of some duration of time prior to judgment day. When the fifth seal is opened in the visions of Revelation, the apostle John sees the souls of martyrs in heaven who are eagerly waiting for judgment day to occur. They are given robes and told to “wait a little longer” (Rev 6:11). The visions of the seals, the trumpets, the witnesses, and the beasts all present events which will happen during the New Testament era, culminating on judgment day. Revelation 12:6,14 and 13:5 apparently speak of the New Testament era cryptically as 1260 days/42 months/3½ times. Revelation 20:2 says that Satan is to be bound for “a thousand years.” Though we do not take the figurative language of these visions literally, still a certain amount of time is implied for these events to take place.

Finally, the apostle Peter knows that there will be enough time before the second coming for scoffers to arise. These scoffers will see the time passing and assume that the prophecy of the second coming has failed. Peter says, “You must understand that in the last days scoffers will come... 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’” (2 Pe 3: 3-4).

#### **F. The apostles continue to make plans for the future and to work**

It is interesting to notice that the apostles do not stop making plans for the future, even though they stress so much that the end is near. They commonly speak as if they assume they will still be alive on earth in a year or two. Paul could speak about his plans to “go to Spain” (Ro 15:23-25). John could write about his intentions to “visit you and talk with you face to face” (2 Jn 12). The epistles are filled with the personal plans of the authors (1 Co 4:19; 2 Co 12:14; Php 2:19; 1 Ti 3:14; 2 Ti 4:11; Phm 22). The apostles do not sit on their hands waiting. They act as if there is time remaining.

Also when Paul is faced with Christians who gave up their employment in order to wait for the second coming, as we suspect to be the case in Thessalonica, he is unequivocal in his admonition that they continue to

work. “When we were with you, we gave you this rule: ‘If a man will not work, he shall not eat.’ We hear that some among you are idle... Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ, to settle down and earn the bread they eat” (2 Th 3:10-12). The closeness of Christ’s return should not lead to idleness.

### **G. There is an explanation for any “delay” which may occur**

Peter addresses the issue of “delay” in regard to judgment day. He gives two reasons for any supposed delay: 1) God’s timetable is different than man’s. “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day” (2 Pe 3:8). What seems like a long time to man is really only a short time in God’s perspective. 2) God has a gracious purpose for withholding judgment 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” (2 Pe 3:9). He wants people to repent. He wants to give time for the full number of those who have been elected to come to faith in Christ.

Revelation 6 also supports the idea of God waiting for the full number to be brought in. Revelation 6 says that judgment day will come when the full number of martyrs has been reached. The souls crying beneath the altar were told to wait a little longer, “until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed” (Rev 6:11).

### **H. These are many general signs of the end**

In regard to the time of the second coming, Christ and the apostles of course have given many signs which are to be indicators that the end is near.

Most of these signs are general signs which have been evidenced in every age of the New Testament era. The words of Christ in Matthew 24 include these general signs: false Christs, wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution of Christians, falling away of Christians, false prophets, and the increase of wickedness (Mt 24:5-13). The list in Luke 21 includes pestilences, fearful events, and great signs from heaven (Lk 21:11). The sign of false teaching and apostasy is frequently referred to by the apostles (1 Ti 4:1-3; 2 Ti 3:1-5; 4:3-4; Jude 18).

Sometimes these signs are divided into three categories: 1) Signs in nature are earthquakes and signs from heaven, 2) Signs in the lives of men and nations are wars, famines, diseases, and wickedness, and 3) Signs in the church are false teachers, apostasy, and the persecution of Christians.

Certainly some of these signs are “natural” events which have scientific explanations. Still this does not take away from their significance as true signs from God. The rainbow, for example, also has a scientific explanation. Yet it is still a true sign from God.

Lutheran exegetes have differed in their understanding of the darkening of the sun and the falling of stars as signs of the end (Mt 24:29; Mk 13:24-35; Lk 21:25-26; Ac 2:20). Some consider the darkening of the sun and the falling of stars to be occurrences of judgment day itself, occurring after the distress of the last days of the world. Some, including Luther<sup>i</sup> and Adolph Hoenecke<sup>ii</sup>, consider the darkening of the sun to refer to eclipses, and the falling stars to refer to meteors and shooting stars. Then these signs are included in the general signs which have been experienced throughout the New Testament era, and the distressing days which they follow would be the last days of Jerusalem.

It is also worth noting that the book of Revelation speaks much about these signs in symbolic language. It has been pointed out that the seals in Revelation 6 reveal the same phenomena which the gospels present as signs of the end—the spread of the gospel, war, famine, pestilence, and persecution.<sup>iii</sup> As Revelation portrays gruesome calamities through which the believers are protected (Rev 6:2-11; 8:7-13; 9:1-21), we think of the signs of the end recorded in the rest of the New Testament.

There are those, of course, who read the book of Revelation in a chronological fashion. Millennialists assume that only chapters 1-3 refer to the New Testament era. They take chapters 4-20 as referring to the seven-year tribulation. Then chapter 20 is the millennium and chapters 21-22 present the final consummation in heaven. The proper way to read Revelation, however, is as a book which presents the entire New Testament era in various visions. Chapters 4-20 then correlate with the signs given in the rest of the Bible.

## **I. There are some preliminaries to be fulfilled prior to judgment day which were not fulfilled immediately at Pentecost**

It is true, however, that some of the signs were not fulfilled immediately in the church at Pentecost. Some took a degree of time to be fulfilled. Undoubtedly this fact did not cause problems for the apostles who also stressed that the second coming was near. They assumed that each of these preliminaries could have been fulfilled quite quickly in God's plan, and that the end could still therefore come in their lifetimes. Let's take a closer look at these preliminaries which were not fulfilled immediately.

### *1. The preaching of the gospel into all the world*

One sign which was not fulfilled immediately is the preaching of the gospel into all the world. Jesus said, "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Mt 24:14; Mk 13:10). Jesus told the disciples that repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached in his name "to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Lk 24:47). Jesus promised the disciples that they would be witnesses "to the ends of the earth" (Ac 1:8). Paul knew he had been commissioned to go "far away to the Gentiles" (Ac 22:21). This spreading of the gospel obviously took some time.

### *2. The destruction of Jerusalem*

In his great eschatological discourse on Tuesday of Holy Week, Jesus of course blends together the discussion of the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world. The destruction of Jerusalem is a foreshadowing of the end of the world. In the perspective of a prophet, Jesus puts together two future events which are similar without indicating the time gap in between.

Yet a careful reading of the Jerusalem prediction leads to the conclusion that the destruction of Jerusalem was predicted to be distinct from and prior to the final judgment. The words do not make it possible to compress the two, or to assume that the destruction of Jerusalem would happen at the same time as judgment day.

Jesus says in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem that Jerusalem will be "surrounded by armies" (Lk 21:20). Believers are to "flee to the mountains" (Lk 21:21). People will "be taken as prisoners to all the nations" (Lk 21:24). Then Jerusalem will be "trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Lk 21:24). None of this is the language of judgment day, which speaks of destruction by fire without any possibility of escape. The fact that there will be a period of time after the destruction of Jerusalem ("the times of the Gentiles" -- cf. also Rev 11:2), indicates that this event must precede judgment day.

Consequently, we must conclude that the destruction of Jerusalem was a preliminary event which needed to be fulfilled before the second coming of Christ. As the apostles were aware of this, and still said that the second coming was near, they must have assumed that this destruction could happen quickly in God's plan.

### *3. The revealing of the antichrist*

It seems that Paul faced people in Thessalonica who were so taken up with the nearness of Christ's return that they quit working. To help them out of this misunderstanding, Paul wrote about the antichrist. Paul told them that judgment day really couldn't happen immediately, because the antichrist needed to be revealed first. He writes, "That day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction" (2 Th 2:3). At the time Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, the antichrist hadn't been revealed yet, because he was being "held back." Paul writes, "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 (2 Th 2:6-8).

Who or what is the "binder" in this passage has been the subject of much discussion, and it should be admitted that we do not know for sure. It is a neuter participle in v. 6 and a masculine singular participle in v. 7. There are two explanations which surface quite frequently in our circles. Possibly it was orthodox teaching in

the apostolic age, or the apostles or Paul himself. The falsehood of the papacy could not really become prominent as long as the apostles were present to uphold the truth. Another explanation is that it was the Roman Empire. The papacy did not really establish itself as the lord in the west until there was a vacuum to fill in Rome with the absence of the Roman emperor.

At any rate, this passage establishes another preliminary event which had to be fulfilled prior to the second coming of Christ.

Again, how did Paul harmonize the two thoughts? In 1 Thessalonians he encouraged the believers to be ready at all times because the Lord would return as a thief. In 2 Thessalonians he says the antichrist must be revealed first. Undoubtedly he felt that the revealing of the antichrist hypothetically could happen quite quickly according to God's plan, and therefore the end could still come during their lifetimes. Paul adds that the development of the antichrist was already incipient at his time (2 Th 2:7).

#### *4. The "loosing" of Satan shortly before the end*

Various eschatological passages make it clear that there is to be a final, all-out assault by Satan on the church right before judgment day. The night is to be the darkest right before the dawn.

A key passage for this truth is Revelation 20. At the conclusion of the thousand years of the New Testament era, Satan "must be set free for a short time" (Rev 20:3). Satan "will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—God and Magog—to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them" (Rev 20:7-9). Also Revelation 16:12-16 speaks of the gathering of troops for a final battle. Shortly before judgment day, Satan will be permitted to gather many forces of evil against the church. Then Jesus will suddenly appear to condemn Satan and his followers to hell for all eternity.

Jesus in Matthew 24:21-22 states that there will be a "distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened." In the context Jesus is certainly speaking about the distress experienced literally in Jerusalem prior to the destruction in 70 A.D. Yet in this chapter where the destruction of Jerusalem prefigures the end of the world, it is commonly assumed that these words include the thought of a great distress which will also immediately precede the last day.

#### *5. The death of Peter?*

Some exegetes include the death of Peter as another preliminary event which needed to be fulfilled prior to judgment day on the basis of John 21:18-19. At the reinstatement of Peter in John 21, Jesus spoke these words to Peter, "I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." John, speaking after the event, then adds this commentary: "Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God" (Jn 21:19).

It is hard to determine, however, just how clear this message would have been to Peter and the early church. The statements about stretching out hands and being dressed are somewhat cryptic. It is possible that this is one of those prophecies which became clear to John and the rest only after the event. Surely the prophecy is clear when it states that Peter would become an "old" man. Yet we don't know how old Peter was during the ministry of Jesus, so it is hard to say even if that expression necessitates a significant amount of time.

### **J. Summary**

Without a doubt the message of the New Testament is that the time of judgment day is unknown and unknowable. And it is near. Jesus is coming soon. So Christians are to live in constant readiness for his return. Would we say, then, that the apostles imagined the second coming to be imminent? The way that term is usually used, we would say "no." "Imminent" is usually taken to mean that there are no additional prerequisites needing to be fulfilled. There is nothing left that has to happen first; the parousia is the next event in the prophetic

program. To ascribe this to the apostles in the apostolic age would be saying too much.<sup>iv</sup> They did recognize certain preliminaries which were not in place on Pentecost, such as the preaching of the gospel in all the world, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the revealing of the antichrist. They knew that these preliminaries could happen quickly, however, so they were still convinced that judgment day could happen in their lifetimes and that the Christians of their age needed to be watching for Christ's return.

In essence, then, the apostles had the same eschatological perspective which we find also in the Old Testament. The prophets in the Old Testament were quick to say that the day of the Lord was near (Joel 3:14; Ob 15; Zep 1:14). Yet they also knew of preliminaries prior to the coming of the Messiah, such as the coming of Elijah (Mal 4:5) and the rising and falling of kingdoms (Da 2,3,7). They were aware that the day could tarry or delay from their perspective, and that if it delayed they should simply wait for it. Habakkuk says, "For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay" (Hab 2:3).

There is a certain tension in both the Old and the New Testament in regard to future events. The predicted future may happen soon, so we should be ready at all times. It is possible, though, that the predicted future may not happen immediately. In that case we continue to trust God's Word and wait patiently for its fulfillment. One finds both the language of nearness, and the language of precursors and preliminaries.

## **II. Our perspective on the Time of the Second Coming**

### **A. How perspective is the same and how different from the New Testament writers**

Needless to say, as Bible-believing Christians our perspective in 1996 needs to be basically the same as that of the New Testament. We know the day is appointed for Christ's return. We know it is near. We do not seek to determine the date, but we remain ready at all times. If the day doesn't come immediately, we trust that God has a good purpose for what seems to us to be a delay. We continue to trust God's Word and wait. While we wait we are busy doing the work which God has given us to do.

It might be asked, however, whether we should say that the second coming is "imminent" for us? Have all the preliminaries been fulfilled? Would we say that Christ could come at any moment? Or are there events which still need to take place first?

It is the conviction of this writer that we in our present age may speak about the second coming as imminent. It could happen at any moment. The message of imminency should permeate our preaching and teaching.

Such a conviction is not based chiefly on the "near" passages of the New Testament, however. As we have seen, Paul and the apostles spoke about the second coming as near, even though they recognized that there were some preliminary events which had to happen first. The apostles used "near" language without holding strictly to an "imminent" coming.

We can use the word "imminent," however, because all of the preliminaries have been adequately fulfilled. There is nothing given as a sign in the Bible which is left unfulfilled. This leads us to conclude that Jesus could return at any moment.

### **B. All of the preliminary events have been adequately fulfilled**

To establish this point, let's look at the five preliminaries above. Have they all been fulfilled? Automatically we can answer "yes" to the destruction of Jerusalem and the death of Peter. What about the other three? It is the conviction of this writer that they have been adequately fulfilled. Certainly God may have some greater fulfillment in mind in the future. But they are fulfilled sufficiently in our age so that we could conclude that the sign has taken place. Let's look at the three.

#### *1. The spread of the gospel into all the world*

As we look around the world, we all know that there are segments of the world's population where Christianity is virtually or completely unknown. Does this mean that the sign given by Christ is yet to be fulfilled?

I suppose one could argue that world evangelization is taking place today in ways in which it never has before. For one thing, gospel broadcasts are now on radio waves, and one could say the gospel in this way is traveling around the world.

But the best course of action here is to take to heart the inspired commentary of the New Testament. When writing to the Colossians about 60 A.D., Paul says, "This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant" (Col 1 :23). Other passages also hint at the thought that already in the days of the apostles, it could be said that the gospel had penetrated into all the world (Ro 1 :8; 10:18; Col 1:6; 1 Th 1:8; 1 Tim 3:16). Obviously Paul felt that world evangelization had taken place to a degree already in his day, as the gospel had been quickly spread in the early church. With these Bible passages in hand, we can say that the sign has already been fulfilled. We can certainly hope that God will allow the further spread of the gospel in our age. But we could not say that this sign is unfulfilled.

It is curious that Oswald Allis takes the opposite opinion in his book *Prophecy and the Church*. This book has been well received in our circles because it carefully points out the errors of dispensationalism. It shows from the Bible that the church is the new Israel in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Yet Allis speaks against what he calls the "any moment theory" for the return of Christ.<sup>v</sup> He says that Christ could not return at any moment. In a footnote he implies that world evangelization has not taken place.<sup>vi</sup>

This has not been the opinion of orthodox Lutherans over the years, however. The *Weimarische Bibelwerk* from the age of Lutheran orthodoxy says about the sign of worldwide evangelism, "This was fulfilled at the time of the apostles before the destruction of Jerusalem, when they preached the gospel in all the world after Christ's ascension (Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15; Ro 10:18; Col 1:23)."<sup>vii</sup> F. Pieper says, "Even in the days of the Apostles it could be said with good reason that the preaching of the Gospel had penetrated into all the world (Ro 1:8; 10:18; 1 Th 1:8; Ac 19:10; 1 Ti 3:16)."<sup>viii</sup>

## 2. *The revealing of the Antichrist*

Among us as confessional Lutherans there is agreement on the fact that the antichrist has been revealed in the Roman papacy. This preliminary is no longer left unfulfilled.

When one reads the marks of the antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2, one thinks naturally of the papacy. He "sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God." "The secret power of lawlessness is already at work." "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."

The Smalcald Articles, of course, say, "This teaching shows forcefully that the pope is the very antichrist, who has exalted himself above, and opposed himself against Christ" (II, iv, 10). The Tractate says, "The marks of antichrist plainly agree with the kingdom of the pope and his adherents" (39).

Certainly it could be possible that future developments may still be coming in regard to the antichrist. But any such future developments would have to involve the Roman papacy. And one does not need any future development for the sign to be adequately fulfilled.

In this regard it is interesting to consider 1 John 2:18-19. John, writing late in the first century, says, "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." John knew the prediction that the antichrist was coming before the end. John could see antichrists in his age. He knew that the great antichrist was on his way. From this he concluded that it was truly the "last hour." He knew that the world was closer than ever before to the end, and that the time was obviously later than it had ever been before.

This introduces the question: when was the antichrist revealed? It seems that the great antichrist was not yet revealed when John wrote 1 John, because he said the antichrist was coming. It is true that many church



fathers including Irenaeus, Augustine, and Jerome taught that the antichrist had not yet been revealed, and therefore the second coming was not imminent. We would simply say that it was a gradual process. Certainly the antichrist was revealed by the time of Luther, and there were many who identified the antichrist prior to the Reformation. This whole question is moot, of course, for our purposes. What is important for us is that the antichrist has certainly been revealed prior to our age. For us this sign is fulfilled.

Needless to say, however, there are many in our age who do not consider this prophecy to be fulfilled. Many look for a future individual. Many surround the coming of this future antichrist with a whole package of additional details. Some say that he will rule over a revived Roman Empire. Some tie his activity to a future temple during the seven-year tribulation.

### 3. *The “loosing” of Satan*

It is impossible to determine with absolute certainty if or when the “short time” of Revelation 20:3 has begun. We know that the entire New Testament era is characterized by increasing wickedness. The “loosing” of Satan right before the end, therefore, will bring about conditions which are different only in degree, not in essence.

However, it has been common for conservative Lutherans to give as their opinion that we are now in the time of Satan’s final loosing. This opinion is based upon the conviction that times now are thoroughly wicked. It would not need to get any worse in order for this sign to be fulfilled.

Dr. Becker in his commentary writes, “As we survey our modern world it would surely appear that we are living in this last period of world history. Never before has the world seen the development of so many antichristian cults. Never before has the gospel been so wickedly denied by an apostate church. Even theologians speak of our times as the ‘post-Christian era.’ Satan appears to have been released from his prison.”<sup>ix</sup> Others who presume that we are presently in the “short time” are W. Gawrisch<sup>x</sup>, J.P. Meyer<sup>xi</sup>, and F. Pieper<sup>xii</sup>.

J. Stephenson in his recent book on eschatology does a good job of painting the blackness of our current age. He correctly sees a “marked ‘intensification’ of the signs in our own day” which is seen most readily in “the swelling apostasy within Christendom itself.”<sup>xiii</sup> In addition he asserts that governmental persecution of Christendom “has made the 20th century more than any other the age of martyrs.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Once again, there may be future turmoil in store which is worse than the present. But the present conditions fulfill the prophecy adequately, so that we cannot say that this sign is unfulfilled. One could say that the prophecy is fulfilled “in kind.” We can see fulfillment which fits the nature of the prediction. Whether or not the prophecy is fulfilled “in degree” in our age, we cannot know for sure.

### **C. It has been customary for conservative Lutherans to speak of Christ’s return as imminent--it could happen at any moment**

Because these preliminary events have all been adequately fulfilled, it is the conviction of this writer that we should live and preach with the understanding that the return of Christ is imminent. There is nothing left that has to happen first. Christ could return at any time.

This also has been the way conservative Lutherans have customarily spoken. C.F.W. Walther in the Milwaukee Colloquy with the Iowa Synod said, “Whoever conceives of the 1000 years in such a way that the last day could not come each day, he is no Lutheran, and we can not give to him the hand of brotherhood.”<sup>xv</sup> A. Hoenecke writes, “The time of the judgment is the last day. Its occurrence on a particular date cannot be predicted. But because of the fulfillment of the signs announcing it, the last day must be expected constantly and regarded as near.”<sup>xvi</sup> J. Ylvisaker in *The Gospels* writes, “As Christians, we shall be alert to the truth that the end may come at any time, that the Lord may appear today or tonight.”<sup>xvii</sup> A. Graebner writes, “The predicted second visible advent of Christ may be expected at any time, since all the signs which are to remind us of his coming have been fulfilled or are still in process of fulfillment.”<sup>xviii</sup> W. Gawrisch writes, “The eschatological signs of his coming have been and are being continually and cumulatively fulfilled in the history of the New Testament church. We may therefore expect Christ’s return in glory at any time.”<sup>xix</sup> B.W. Teigen

writes, “Scripture teaches that the last day is imminent.”<sup>xx</sup> J. Stephenson says, “The signs of the end times... have known some measure of fulfillment in every age of Christendom, so that the fathers from New Testament times onwards have confidently looked for the imminent consummation of all things at Christ’s return in glory.”<sup>xxi</sup>

It may surprise us, however, to read the pertinent sentence in Pieper’s Dogmatics. Pieper says, “To what extent have these signs been fulfilled? Like Luther, we must, on the one hand, speak guardedly on this point; on the other hand, however, we shall have to say with him ‘that the greater part of these signs have already occurred and not many others are to be expected.’”<sup>xxii</sup> Why does Luther only say that the “greater part” of the signs have been fulfilled? What signs are not fulfilled?

When Luther and Pieper imply that some signs have not yet taken place, I assume that they are including in their list of signs some of the events which are commonly associated with judgment day itself. For example, Jesus says that “the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn” (Mt 24:30). Obviously this and other such concomitants of judgment day have not occurred.

Certainly Luther does not mean to put off judgment day. When he says that most of the signs have occurred, he uses this as a motivation for people to be ready at all times. One shouldn’t wait until the very end when the remaining signs will take place and it will be too late (Cf. SL XIII, 1 376). He, in harmony with the other Lutheran teachers here quoted, speaks of judgment day as near and constantly expected.

### **III. False Teaching in Regard to the Time of Christ’s Return**

Without a doubt, the devil has stirred up a wide variety of false teachings in regard to the time of Christ’s return. There is, of course, a special need in the area of eschatology to cling fastidiously and blindly to the written Word of God, because eschatology deals with information about the future which is completely outside our realm of experience. Actually, the fact that the WELS and ELS have shared unity of doctrine on the end times, one could say is a special marvel of God, in view of the fact that there are such a wide variety of errors which are prevalent. The modern Christian Church is fragmented on this issue. Many errors have also arisen within the Lutheran church itself.

Now permit me to catalog and comment on a few of the false teachings which are surfaced on this topic, in addition to those already mentioned.

#### **A. Date-setters**

With the clear words of Jesus that no one will know the day and hour, it is surprising that the world has witnessed so many Christian date-setters. Every age has had them. At Luther’s time, a man by the name of Michael Stiefel predicted the second coming for October 19, 1533 at 8:00 a.m. The Lutheran expositor Johann Bengel came up with the year 1836. William Miller, the founder of the Seventh Day Adventists, looked for the return in 1843, and his followers later settled on October 22, 1844. Charles Taze Russell of the Jehovah’s Witnesses set the date for 1914.

In recent memory, Hal Lindsey suspected that it would happen by 1988. Edgar C. Whisenant wrote 88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will be in 1988, and about 4.5 million copies were printed. Lee Jang Rim of South Korea predicted the rapture for October 28, 1992. Most recently, Harold Camping predicted that Jesus would return in September of 1994.

How do these people come up with their calculations? Some work with the figures of Daniel and Revelation. William Miller calculated that the 2300 days of Daniel 8:14 began with the decree of Artaxerxes to Ezra in 457 B.C. By following the “year-day principle,” Christ should have returned in 1843-1844. Hal Lindsey assumed that the “prophetic clock” of God began ticking in 1948 with the establishment of the modern state of Israel. Since Jesus said that he would return within one generation and a Biblical generation is 40 years, Lindsey concluded that Jesus should return by 1988.

Harold Camping, on the other hand, came up with 1994 through a wild use of Biblical numerology. Attached at the end of this paper is a photocopy from his book Are You Ready? He pulls numbers randomly

from the Bible, manipulates them, and then after manipulation determines that they point to 1994. Camping, by the way, deals with Jesus' statement about not knowing the day and hour in this way: Jesus wants the specific day and hour to remain unknown. It may be possible to determine the year and month.

It may be of interest to note one other calculation. Archbishop Ussher in 1654 announced that creation took place on October 26, 4004 B.C. at nine o'clock in the morning. If you add 6000 years to this date, you can come up with October 26, 1996. Why add 6000 years? Already at the time of the Epistle of Barnabas (XV, 3-4), the notion was circulating that the world would stand 6000 years, one millennium for each of the days of creation. Irenaeus said, "For in as many days as this world was made, in so many thousand years shall it be concluded ...For the day of the Lord is as a thousand years; and in six days created things were completed; it is evident, therefore, that they will come to an end at the sixth thousandth year" (Against Heresies; Book 5, XXVIII, 3).

Needless to say, we find all notions of date-setting to be misguided. Any time a date is set, then Christ's coming will no longer be like a thief.

## **B. Millennialism**

Millennialism teaches on the basis of Revelation 20 that Jesus will reign on earth for a period of 1000 years prior to the final judgment. Most modern-day millennialists also attach a seven-year tribulation before the millennium which they derive from the 70th week of Daniel 9. Many assume that believers will be raptured either before or during or after the tribulation.

There are a host of problems with this dangerous system. The coming of Jesus is split up into two or three separate events. It focuses attention on an earthly kingdom rather than on heaven. It allows for a second chance after the second coming during the millennium. It removes the surprise for at least parts of Christ's coming. The coming of Christ to set up the millennium will come seven years after the start of the tribulation. The final judgment will come 1000 years after the millennium begins.

It is no secret that millennialism has infiltrated the Lutheran church over the years. The Iowa Synod allowed for a form of millennialism in the 1850-60's, and that was one reason they did not join the Synodical Conference. Millennialism has been tolerated in the subsequent Lutheran groupings into which the Iowa Synod has flowed.<sup>xxiii</sup>

It is a gift of God's grace that we in the WELS and ELS stand united with Scripture and the Augsburg Confession in our rejection of millennialism. The Augsburg Confession in Article XVII states: "They [our churches] condemn also others, who are now spreading certain Jewish opinions, that before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed."

## **C. A temple needs to be built as preliminary to judgment day**

In his book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Hal Lindsey writes, "There remains but one more event to completely set the stage for Israel's part in the last great act of her historical drama. That is to rebuild the ancient temple of worship upon its old site... It is certain that the temple will be rebuilt. Prophecy demands it."<sup>xxiv</sup> The fact that this book sold over 28 million copies by 1993 indicates that the idea of a rebuilt temple is receiving widespread circulation in our time.

A recent book entitled *Ready to Rebuild* documents how many people--both Jews and Christians--are making plans today for the rebuilding of the temple. The authors are convinced that a temple is needed because Daniel 9 speaks of sacrifice and offering ending in the middle of the last "seven." They assume that the antichrist will defile the temple 3½ years into the tribulation. Supposedly there are priestly families in Jerusalem who are preparing temple utensils. A cornerstone laying was attempted in 1989. An American rancher has been located who could supply red heifers for the purification process. All of this is part of what is behind Jewish-Palestinian tensions in Jerusalem, because the place where the new temple will have to be built is of course where the Moslem Dome of the Rock is presently standing.

How wonderful is conservative Lutheran doctrine in comparison! We are no longer tied to locations and earthly temples. We are able to worship the Father “in spirit and in truth” through Christ (Jn 4:24). We know that we as believers in the New Testament church comprise God’s new and holy temple (Eph 2:19-22).

#### **D. Jews need to be converted as a preliminary to judgment day**

On the basis of Romans 11, many people have taught that all of the Jews will be converted to faith in Christ prior to judgment day. Romans 11:25-27 says: “Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: ‘The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’”

As has been commonly pointed out by Lutheran expositors, this notion goes against the other passages of the Bible which speak of the Jewish people. The drift of Romans 9-11 is that there will always be a “remnant chosen by grace” among the Jewish people. Some Jews, but not all, will be led to faith in Christ and will be grafted back onto the stem of salvation.

In addition, the “so” of verse 26 is not temporal, but rather means “in this way.” “All Israel” is best taken, to refer to believing Jews. (Others take it to refer to the entire New Testament church). What the verse says is that those who are saved from the Jewish nation will be saved in the same way as believing Gentiles—as Christ the deliverer comes to take away their sins.

#### **E. Schweitzer / “consistent eschatology”**

Albert Schweitzer (1875-1966) initiated a radical theory in regard to eschatology which has become known as “consistent eschatology.” This theory maintains that Christ believed that the end would come immediately during his earth mission. He of course was proved wrong. This theory maintains that the apostle Paul also believed that the end would definitely come in his lifetime. The early church then had to deal with its great disappointment when this imminent end did not materialize. Schweitzer states, “The whole history of ‘Christianity’ down to the present day...is based on the delay of the parousia, the non-occurrence of the parousia, the abandonment of eschatology, the progress and completion of the ‘de-eschatologising’ of religion which has been connected therewith.”<sup>xxv</sup>

It would be good to look at the passages used by proponents of this school. There are three gospel passages used to prove that Jesus expected judgment day during his ministry. There are two Pauline passages used to prove that Paul expected judgment day during his ministry.

The first passage is Matthew 10:23: “When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” On the basis of this verse Schweitzer concludes that Jesus expected the coming of the messianic age in the next days or weeks. However the verse can easily be explained in other ways. Some take it to mean that the work of Jewish evangelization will continue until judgment day. The “coming” of Jesus could also refer to events other than judgment day. It makes good sense to say that the coming of Jesus refers to his resurrection or to Pentecost or to the spread of the gospel in the early church. What appeals most to me is the commonly accepted explanation that Jesus was referring to his coming in judgment at the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

The second passage is Matthew 16:28: “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” (Also Mk9:1; Lk 9:27). This passage is very similar to the preceding and the same range of interpretations can be found. In addition, many assume with this passage that Jesus is referring to his Transfiguration, since that is the event which follows in the text. Once again I am attracted to the explanation that this is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem. The time gap seems about right. Certainly it was true that “some” would be alive for this event 40 years in the future. Though the destruction of Jerusalem is not elsewhere referred to as a “coming” of Christ and his kingdom, yet the destruction of Jerusalem is a type of the final judgment and the same language could be used for both. It is true that Jesus closely links the destruction of Jerusalem with judgment day in his eschatological discourse. In the mind of Jesus, this destruction would be an awesome “coming” of the power of God foreshadowing the last day.

This coming would confirm that the kingdom of Christ had been established and that the Old Testament forms of worship were no longer needed

The third passage is Matthew 24:34: “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” (Also Mk 1:0; Lk 21:32) I see no reason in this passage to understand any group of people other than the generation of people living at the time. The passage says that they will not pass away until the signs of the end become visible. In other words Jesus says, “When you see the destruction of Jerusalem and the rest of the signs, you will know that the end is near. Some of you will live to see these signs.” Schweitzer assumes that “these things” (ταυτα) includes judgment day itself, so that Jesus thereby predicts that some from his generation will live until the end. But the previous verse (v.33) indicates that the “these things” refer to the signs of end without the events of judgment day included. Jesus says, “When you see all these things (ταυτα), you know that it is near, right at the door.” It wouldn’t make sense for judgment day to be included here, so it is natural for judgment day also to be excluded in verse 34.

The most important point, however, is that verses do not prove that Jesus mistakenly expected the coming of the messianic age during his life on earth. When Schweitzer arrives at this conclusion, he is letting himself adopt blasphemous ideas about Christ, when there are fine alternative explanations.

What about Paul? The first of the two Pauline passages is 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17: “The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” The other passage is 1 Corinthians 15:51-52: “I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed--in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”

What does Paul mean when he says “we who are left” and “we will not all sleep”? According to Schweitzer, Paul was convinced that he was going to be alive at judgment day. But once again, the words do not need to say what Schweitzer assumes. The “we” can simply be the “we” of living Christians, no matter who they are in whatever generation. Or Paul could simply be speaking of the case as it was at the moment, if Jesus would return soon.

Some expositors go on to see a development in Paul’s thought. In his earlier letters (such as 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians) Paul supposedly emphasized the nearness of judgment day. In his later letters, Paul spoke as if he were expecting his own death first (cf. 2 Cor 5; Phil 1; 2 Ti 4). But once again, the data is inconclusive. In one of his earliest letters (2 Thessalonians) Paul discusses the antichrist as a preliminary before judgment day. There also is very little time gap between 1 Corinthians (supposedly judgment day oriented) and 2 Corinthians (supposedly death oriented). It is better to say that Paul consistently throughout his ministry viewed the imminency of Christ’s return in his lifetime as a possibility, but not a certainty. Most importantly again, we will not accuse the inspired apostle of making an earlier mistake which later had to be corrected.

## **F. Dodd/“realized eschatology”**

A radical idea of a different sort was championed by Charles H. Dodd (1884-1973). He eliminated “futurist” eschatology altogether, and said that all of New Testament eschatology has already been realized. When Jesus said that the kingdom of God “is near,” Dodd argues that the Greek verb “ἤγγικε” should be translated “has come.” He says, “The gospel of primitive Christianity is a gospel of realized eschatology.”<sup>xxvi</sup> “An absolute end to history, whether it be conceived as coming soon or late, is no more than a fiction designed to express the reality of teleology within history.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

This sounds familiar to readers of the New Testament because Paul faced similar false teachers. In 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 Paul says, “Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come.” In 2 Timothy 2:16-18, Paul says, “Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They

say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.” The teaching of “realized eschatology” is the teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus. It bears the clear condemnation of the apostle Paul.

Certainly it is true that “the fulfillment of the ages” has come upon us, now that Christ has completed his work of salvation (1 Co 10:11). Right now it can be said that we “have” eternal life (Jn 3:36). Yet the Bible also says that we wait for God to bring us to eternal life (Jude 21). There is both a present enjoyment of the blessings of Christ, and a fuller enjoyment which is yet to come in the future. As Berkouwer says, “The relationship between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ constitutes the hallmark of the life of the community of believers.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

#### **IV. Applying the Doctrine of the Imminency of Christ’s Return**

##### **A. Applying it to our lives**

How does it affect our faith and our lives to know that Christ could return at any moment? How are things different in our lives because we know that the second coming is imminent?

As with many other doctrines of the Bible (such as the doctrine of God’s omnipotence and omniscience), there is both a law warning and a gospel comfort for us in the doctrine of the imminent return.

##### *1. It carries a law warning*

The fact that Christ could return at any time carries the law warning that we better not be caught in sin at any time. If we are careless in our Christian lives, we need to repent lest we be caught unawares by the judgment. Repentance is not to be put off until tomorrow, because there may not be any tomorrow.

The New Testament frequently associates the coming of Christ with such law warnings. Jesus 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). Paul says, “The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime” (Ro 13:12-13). “What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of this world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away” (1 Co 7:29-31). Peter says, “You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming” (2 Pe 3:11-12). James bluntly says, “Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!” (Jas 5:9).

Certainly the doctrine of the imminency of Christ’s return is not given just to satisfy our curiosities. It reaches its intended goal as a message of the law when it scares people like you and me into repentance.

##### *2. It carries gospel comfort*

The imminency of Christ’s return also carries with it some splendid gospel comfort for us who believe. We know that each and every day could turn out to be our great day of victory. Our life of struggle and sorrow on earth may soon be at a glorious end. As J. Barton Payne has said, “Each morning, as the Christian casts his glance into the blueness of the sky, he may thrill with the prayerful thought, ‘Perhaps today!’”<sup>xxix</sup> Who of us hasn’t, in times of hardship, been uplifted with the thought, “It will soon be over!” Who of us hasn’t, in times of hardship, groaned, “Come, O Lord!” (1 Co 16:22).

The New Testament frequently associates the coming of Christ with such gospel comfort. Jesus says, “When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Lk 21:28). There is a splendid promise in Colossians 3:4: “When Christ, who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” Peter says, “Set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Pe 1:13) In another place Peter goes on, “That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Pe 3:12-13). The writer to the Hebrews says, “Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to

bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Heb 9:28). Christians can encourage one another with thoughts of judgment day according to 1 Thessalonians 4:17-18: “After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.”

It has been pointed out that Luther and the Reformation restored this gospel emphasis to the church. In the Middle Ages, what was stressed with judgment day was the fearfulness of personally standing before God to be judged. With his typical gospel perspective, Luther looked upon judgment day as something to be desired and longed for as our great day of deliverance because of the work of Jesus Christ.<sup>xxx</sup> Luther said that the signs of the end should be a “pleasant sight” to believers, because they indicate that God “is about to punish the world and finally redeem us from all misfortune and misery.”<sup>xxxi</sup> Luther compared our situation to captives waiting for friends to come and release them. “If you were lying captive in a castle and heard men shooting and storming into it, you would not at all be afraid of this shooting and storming. You would actually be glad about it if you knew that the attack had been begun for your sake, to free you in this way. Do that here, too.”<sup>xxxii</sup>

## **B. Applying it to our work in our Lutheran synods**

What does the teaching of the Bible about the time of judgment day have to say to our work as Lutheran synods?

The fact that Christ could return at any moment gives a sense of urgency to our work, especially our mission work which shares the gospel with unbelievers. Tomorrow may be too late to tell others the way to heaven. Everyday we need to do all we can to save the lost, because their time of grace may soon be at an end. We have to work while it is day, because the night is soon coming when no man can work (Jn 9:4). As Prof. Gawrisch has said, “Being properly prepared for the Lord’s second coming does not mean being sky-watchers, but seed sowers.”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

However the fact that Christ may not return immediately leads us to continue to make plans for the future, and especially to train workers for future service in the kingdom. Because the world may still be standing 50 years from now, we better train the next generation to continue the work after us. The work of Christian education is of utmost importance.

In our church work, we sometimes feel a tension between worker training and mission work. Which is most important?

The Biblical doctrine of the end times makes both of them equally important. Because tomorrow may be the last day, we need to try to save as many as we can today. Because the world may exist for many years, we need to train workers to do faithful work in the future. When it comes to missions and education, it is not an either-or. It is rather a both-and.

If someone were to cut back on worker training with the argument that we are so close to judgment day that all of our best efforts should go into mission work, that is not wholesome. If someone were to cut back on mission work with the thought that it is more important to build for the future, that also would not be wholesome.

Though it may not always be easy to balance the two, the Biblical doctrine of the end times leads us to pursue both mission work and Christian education with equal zeal.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>i</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther. Volume 1*, edited by John Nicholas Lenker (Grand Rapids: Baker), 65-67; also located in SL XI:50-52.

<sup>ii</sup> Adolf Hoenecke, “Die letzte Zeit,” *Verhandlungen der Siebenunddreißigsten Versammlung der Deutschen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Synode von Wisconsin und anderen Staate*, 1887, 29.

<sup>iii</sup> Siegbert Becker, *Revelation* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1985), 103.

<sup>iv</sup> One WELS publication goes too far when it says, “Christ’s return could have taken place at any time since Pentecost.” Cf. Forrest Bivens and David Valleskey, *New Life in Christ* (Milwaukee: Board for Parish Education, 1986), 81.

<sup>v</sup> Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1955), 168ff.

- <sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Weimarische Bibelwerk, Das Neue Testament*, (St. Louis, 1880), 52.
- <sup>viii</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Volume III* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), 519.
- <sup>ix</sup> Becker, *Revelation*, 315-316.
- <sup>x</sup> Wilbert Gawrisch, "Eschatological Prophecies and Current Misinterpretations," in *Our Great Heritage, Volume 3*, Edited by L. Lange (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1991), p. 711.
- <sup>xi</sup> J.P. Meyer, "Das Koenigtum Christi," *Theologische Quartalschrift*, 32:3 (July, 1935), 199.
- <sup>xii</sup> Pieper, *Dogmatics, Vol. III*, 524.
- <sup>xiii</sup> John Stephenson, *Eschatology* (Fort Wayne, IN: The Luther Academy, 1993), 3.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.
- <sup>xv</sup> J.P. Meyer, *Colloquium der Vertreter der Synode von Iowa und der von Missouri, Ohio u. a. St.* (Chicago: 1868), 19.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev. Luth. Dogmatik, Band IV* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1909), 277.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Joh. Ylvisaker, *The Gospels* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1977), 605.
- <sup>xviii</sup> A.L. Graebner, *Outlines of Doctrinal Theology* (Anaheim: Shield, 1988), 229.
- <sup>xix</sup> Gawrisch, *Eschatological Prophecies*, 704.
- <sup>xx</sup> B.W. Teigen, *I Believe—A Study of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1980), 71.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Stephenson, *Eschatology*, 3.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Pieper, *Dogmatics, Vol. III*, 519.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> For an example see Emil W. Matzner, "A Sane Eschatology," *Wartburg Seminary Quarterly*, 1947, 3-17.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (New York: Bantam, 1973), 45.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Macmillan, 1969), 360.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960), 85.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> G.C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 113.
- <sup>xxix</sup> J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 161.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Translated by Robert C. Schultz. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 420-421.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says, Vol. II* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 698.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> *Ibid.*, 699-700.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> W. Gawrisch, "The Lord's Word Concerning the Last Things." Essay presented to the Northern Wisconsin District Meeting, August 5-7, 1974, 28.



**Addenda**

from Harold Camping, *Are You Ready?*, New York: Vantage, 1993. Pages 310-313.

**Event No. 49****Christ was Crucified and God Began to Evangelize the World: A.D. 33**

**Relationship of the Event to the Gospel Message:** This is the centerpiece of the Gospel. Christ's crucifixion brought salvation and heaven to the believers but it guarantees judgment on the unsaved.

*Time Line:* Years to the end of the world, A.D. 1988:  $1988 - 33 = 1955$  years.

*Time Line's Spiritual Emphasis:*  $1955$  years =  $5 \times 17 \times 23$ .

The program of the Gospel is that Christ was crucified so that the world could be evangelized. As the Gospel of salvation (5) goes forth, it brings heaven (17) to those who believe but judgment (23) upon those who do not believe.

**Chapter 11. Events and Time Lines**

#	Year B.C.	Event	To 7 B.C. Jesus' Birth	To 33 A.D. Jesus Crucified	To 1988 A.D. Begin Final Trib.	1994 A.D. End of World
1.	11013	Creation			13000 yrs $13 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10$	
2.	10883	Shem born			12870 yrs $10 \times 3 \times 3 \times 11 \times 13$	
3.	7106	Enoch born				9100 yrs* $7 \times 13 \times 100$
4.	3617	Eber born				5610 yrs $3 \times 10 \times 11 \times 17$
5.	2297	Terah born			4284 yrs $3 \times 12 \times 7 \times 17$	4290 yrs $3 \times 10 \times 11 \times 13$
6.	2167	Abraham born	2160 yrs $2 \times 3 \times 12 \times 3 \times 10$	2200 yrs* $2 \times 11 \times 100$		4160 yrs $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 4 \times 10 \times 13$
7.	2092	Abraham enters Canaan		2125 yrs* $5 \times 5 \times 5 \times 17$	4080 yrs* $2 \times 10 \times 12 \times 17$	
8.	2068	Abraham circumcised. Sodom & Gomorrah destroyed.		2100 yrs $3 \times 7 \times 100$	4056 yrs* $2 \times 12 \times 13 \times 13$	
9.	2067	Isaac born		2100 yrs* $3 \times 7 \times 100$		
10.	2030	Sarah dies	2023 yrs. $7 \times 17 \times 17$			
11.	2007	Jacob born	2000 yrs. $2 \times 1000$	2040 yrs* $10 \times 12 \times 17$		4000 yrs $4 \times 1000$
12.	1992	Abraham dies		2024 yrs $2 \times 4 \times 11 \times 23$		
13.	1967	Esau 40 yrs old				3960 yrs $3 \times 10 \times 11 \times 12$
14.	1916	Joseph born				3910 yrs* $10 \times 17 \times 23$
15.	1907	Jacob becomes Israel				3900 yrs $3 \times 13 \times 100$

\* This is the calendar period obtained by adding the Old Testament years to the New Testament years. The actual period that elapsed between these two events is one year less than the calendar year because there is no year 0. In addition to the evidence shown in this chart that Jesus was crucified in 33 A.D., there is much more evidence found in the Bible that this is so. Therefore, we can know that we are faithful to Scripture in understanding that God ties important spiritual events together both by the use of actual years as well as by the use of calendar years. NOTE: Keep in mind that the numbers in the multiples each represent a spiritual truth.

16. 1899	Joseph 17 yrs old		1932 yrs* 4 x 3 x 7 x 23	3887 yrs* 13 x 13 x 23	
17. 1887	Isaac dies		1920 yrs 4 x 4 x 10 x 12		
18. 1879	Famine begins	1872 yrs 12 x 12 x 13	1911 yrs 3 x 7 x 7 x 13		3872 yrs 4 x 8 x 11 x 11
19. 1877	Israel enters Egypt	1870 yrs 10 x 11 x 17		3864 yrs 2 x 7 x 12 x 23	
20. 1527	Moses born		1560 yrs* 12 x 13 x 10		3520 yrs 2 x 4 x 4 x 10 x 11
21. 1447	Israel leaves Egypt. Law given at Mt. Sinai	1440 yrs 12 x 12 x 10	1480 yrs* 2 x 2 x 10 x 37		
22. 1407	Israel enters Canaan	1400 yrs 2 x 7 x 100	1440 yrs* 12 x 12 x 10		3400 yrs 2 x 17 x 100
23. 1207	Gideon dies & his sons killed	1200 yrs 12 x 100			3200 yrs 2 x 4 x 4 x 100
24. 1181	Jair judges				3174 yrs 2 x 3 x 23 x 23
25. 1159	Jephthah judges	1152 yrs 2 x 2 x 2 x 12 x 12		3146 yrs 2 x 11 x 11 x 13	
26. 1153	Ibsen judges				3146 yrs 2 x 11 x 11 x 13
27. 1068	Ark taken by Philistines		1100 yrs 11 x 100		
28. 1067	Ark restored		1100 yrs* 11 x 100		3060 yrs 2 x 3 x 10 x 17 x 3
29. 1047	Saul becomes king	1040 yrs 2 x 4 x 10 x 13	1080 yrs* 2 x 2 x 3 x 3 x 3 x 10		
30. 1037	David born			3025 yrs* 5 x 5 x 11 x 11	
31. 1007	David becomes king	1000 yrs 10 x 10 x 10			3000 yrs 3 x 1000
32. 967	Temple foundation laid	960 yrs 2 x 2 x 2 x 10 x 12	1000 yrs* 10 x 10 x 10 999 yrs 3 x 3 x 3 x 37		2960 yrs 2 x 4 x 10 x 37
33. 931	Kingdom divided	924 yrs 7 x 11 x 12			2925 yrs* 3 x 3 x 5 x 5 x 13
34. 842	Jehoram dies				2835 yrs 5 x 3 x 3 x 3 x 3 x 7
35. 841	Athaliah begins to reign				2835 yrs* 5 x 7 x 3 x 3 x 3 x 3
36. 835	Athaliah dies	828 yrs 3 x 12 x 23	867 yrs 3 x 17 x 17		
37. 796	Jehoiada dies		828 yrs 3 x 12 x 23	2783 yrs 11 x 11 x 23	
38. 795	Joash dies		828 yrs* 3 x 12 x 23	2783 yrs* 11 x 11 x 23	
39. 789	Uzziah begins to reign	782 yrs 2 x 17 x 23			2783 yrs* 11 x 11 x 23
40. 737	Uzziah dies		770 yrs* 10 x 7 x 11		2730 yrs 10 x 3 x 7 x 13
41. 701	Hezekiah saved from Assyrians			2688 yrs 2 x 2 x 8 x 7 x 12	2695 yrs* 5 x 7 x 7 x 11
42. 605	Jehoiakim's line is cursed	598 yrs 2 x 13 x 23	637 yrs 7 x 13 x 7	2592 yrs 2 x 3 x 3 x 12 x 2	
43. 587	Jerusalem destroyed			2574 yrs 2 x 3 x 3 x 11 x 13	

44. 582	23 <sup>rd</sup> yr of Nebuchadnezzar	575 yrs 5 x 5 x 23			2576 yrs* 2 x 2 x 4 x 7 x 23
45. 560	Jehoiachin freed from prison		592 yrs 2 x 2 x 4 x 37	2548 yrs* 2 x 2 x 7 x 7 x 13	2553 yrs 3 x 23 x 37
46. 458	Ezra brings the law to Jerusalem		490 yrs 7 x 7 x 10		
47. 7	Jesus born		40 yrs* 4 x 10 39 yrs 3 x 13		2000 yrs 2 x 1000
48. A.D. 7	Twelve-year-old Jesus goes to temple		26 yrs 2 x 13		
49. A.D. 33	Jesus goes to the cross. New Testament era begins			1955 5 x 17 x 23	

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