

## Chapter 9

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# The Return of Christ

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

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

The old Norse warriors of northern Europe believed they could never enter the hall of the gods unless they died with a sword in their hands, preferably inflicting death on someone else. In other words, heaven could only be attained by fighting one's way in. Contrary to Weber's theory about the "Protestant work ethic," the origin of the work mentality probably lies much deeper in the European psyche than in the teaching of the Puritans, who actually placed their stress on grace rather than works. If the gods were as self-indulgent and treacherous as Wotan and Loge, however, the old barbarians had no choice but to fend for themselves. What god cared

for them? Given the debauched pantheon of northern Europe, the old Europeans looked for a day of doom even for the gods themselves, when they would be consumed by flames.

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

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

In other words, the human race shares a fearful outlook on eternity. How might one be counted worthy to enter bliss and escape just punishment? The gospel of Jesus Christ supplies an answer to this question, distinguishing itself from the other religious systems of the world.

## **BIBLICAL BACKGROUND**

The Christian understanding of judgment and the final destruction of the present world order has its basis in the prophecies of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

### **Old Testament**

The prophets of Israel and Judah spoke of a day of reckoning designated as "the day of the LORD." This Day involved both the

judgment of Israel and her salvation. Cosmic upheaval, social and economic disaster, plague, and war would all accompany the day of the Lord as aspects of God's judgment on the whole earth (Ezek. 7:1–27; Joel 2:14–16, 30–31; Zeph. 1:10–18; Zech. 12:1–9; 14:4, 12–15). The wrath and punishment of God would fall on Israel and all other nations as God brought an end to wickedness in the world (Isa. 2:6–22; 13:6, 9, 13; 34:8; 63:4; Jer. 46:10; 47:4; Ezek. 30:3; Amos 5:18–20; Obad. 15; Zeph. 2:8–15). In the face of wrath and destruction, however, God would bring salvation from the oppression of wickedness for the remnant who have sought righteousness (Dan. 12:3; Zeph. 1:3). God himself would purify this remnant as a refiner smelts gold to remove the dross from what is pure (Dan. 12:10; Zeph. 3:9–20; Zech. 13:9; Mal. 3:2; 4:1, 5). Over the purified remnant, God would reign as king forever (Ezek. 43:6–9; Dan. 7:21–22, 26–27; Zech. 14:9–21).

Books such as Daniel and Ezekiel vividly portray the circumstances surrounding “the day of the LORD”, and during the intertestamental period a number of writings appeared that explore the theme. This day as the Day of Judgment involves the resurrection of the righteous and the wicked—an idea that became a central concern of groups like the Pharisees and the Essenes (see Dan. 12:2). Against the background of the Jewish expectation of “the day of the LORD”, the gospel speaks of the return of the Lord Jesus to judge the world.

### **The Gospels**

The Day of Judgment represents a significant theme in the message of Jesus, who spoke frequently of the coming of the Son of Man—an event the Jews anticipated, based on Daniel's prophecy in Daniel 7:13–14:

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

Jesus spoke a number of parables to stress that the Son of Man would come without warning to bring the judgment. Only those living faithfully in expectation of his coming would be prepared for the judgment (Matt. 24:37–51; 25:13–30; Luke 12:35–46; 17:26–37). In this regard, faith appears as concrete action in anticipation of the expected appearance of the Son of Man. The watchful servant fulfills the wishes of the master, regardless of how long the master delays. In light of his parables that stress keeping watch, the question of Jesus seems all the more plaintive: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8).

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

The Sermon on the Mount begins with an attention-grabbing litany that redefines happiness in terms of preparation to enter the kingdom (Matt. 5:3–10). The ultimate blessing in anticipation of entry into the kingdom comes through persecution because of Jesus (5:11–12; cf. 19:28). Jesus declares that goodness is the reason for which people have been placed in the world and that without righteousness, no one may enter the kingdom (5:13–20). He then explores the failure of the quest for righteousness by demonstrating how people may keep the letter of the law but fail in righteousness because of what lies within them; thus, people fail to achieve the perfection of God (5:21–48). People also strive for righteousness through acts of piety, but Jesus exposes the failure of human motive (6:1–24). People have the greatest difficulty living by faith and trusting God (6:25–7:14). The problem lies in the very nature of people, for “a bad tree bears bad fruit” (7:17). Jesus then declares that the way into the kingdom is through him; those who accept him and his words will be received by him on the Day of Judgment

(7:21–27). This thought is reinforced in John's Gospel (John 12:47–48).

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

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

The warnings of judgment appear as part of the total message of Jesus in his call for righteousness. Even the religious behavior of the best of people leads to destruction (Matt. 23:1–33; Luke 11:42–52), for all people are subject to the kinds of thoughts, behavior, and motives that constitute unrighteousness. Therefore, Jesus calls on all people to repent (Luke 13:5). Judgment comes as the inevitable result of a life lived apart from faith in God. Judgment will come as a result of deeds and actions in life, but at a deeper level the deeds and actions of life emerge from the essential nature of a person. Stated simply, bad trees do not produce good fruit (Matt. 3:10; 7:19; Luke 3:9; 13:6–9; cf. John 15:2, 5, 8). Even though a kind action may be good for the one who receives it, a tainted motive in performing the deed corrupts the deed so far as judgment of the person is concerned (Matt. 6:1–18).<sup>3</sup> A good deed

does not make one righteous, though a righteous person will do good deeds.

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

The judgment as Jesus describes it is not a trial in which the defendant marshals evidence to make a case for being good enough to go to heaven. Jesus describes it more as a simple declaration of the way things are. By his definition of righteousness, no one can enter the kingdom of heaven. The problem is not lost on the disciples, who miss a great deal but understand this point (Matt. 19:25; Mark 10:26; Luke 18:26). The great separation on the Day of Judgment will occur as a result of the essential nature of things: wheat and tares, sheep and goats, varieties of fish (Matt. 13:24–30, 47–52; 25:31–46). The Judge will simply declare what people really are when the secrets of all hearts are disclosed.

This understanding of the judgment provides the context for the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus. One might even imagine that the conversation came following a time of teaching like the Sermon on the Mount. Nicodemus begins by acknowledging Jesus as a great teacher from God—a great teacher of the Law. Jesus' response seems remarkably disjointed unless it takes place in a context like his teaching on judgment and righteousness, for he replies, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). In this conversation Jesus describes how people can experience the fundamental change of nature through the Spirit of God that will allow them to enter the kingdom. Condemnation does not come at the end of time; it hangs over the entire human race now. Eternal life is not a privilege that will be taken away from some at the judgment, rather it is an offer God gives to those who want eternal relationship with him. Eternal life will be

added to those who did not have it by their nature. Thus, to the disciples' quandary over how anyone can be saved, Jesus replied, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26; Mark 10:27; Luke 18:27).

The dynamic of one's nature manifesting itself in behavior appears in dramatic fashion in the account of the separation of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46). The sheep do the sort of things that sheep do and the goats do the sort of things that goats do. Neither group thinks about it because each does what comes naturally. The righteous do righteousness and the unrighteous do not. All will be accountable for their actions on the Day of Judgment (Matt. 12:36–37; John 5:27–30). On the other hand, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will receive it (Matt. 5:6); those who seek the Holy Spirit will receive him (Luke 11:13) and will thereby obtain the purity of heart that is necessary to see God (Matt. 5:8).

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

### **General Apostolic Writings**

After Jesus' execution for identifying himself as the Son of Man of Daniel 7 and after his resurrection and ascension, the disciples believed he would return on the clouds of heaven in the manner described in Daniel (Acts 1:11; 1 Thess. 4:13–18; 2 Thess. 1:7; Rev. 1:7). At his appearance, he would change all of his followers instantly so that they become like him (1 Cor. 15:51–52; Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2). As the time drew near for his return, conditions would grow worse and worse on earth; the Antichrist would appear and nominal believers would abandon the church (2 Thess. 2:1–12; 2 Tim. 3:1; 1 John 2:18–19).

The early Christians lived with a certain tension over when the Lord would return. As the apostles died and he did not return, crit-

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

*Cosmic upheaval.* The return of Christ will occur with cosmic upheaval leading up to, and coming as a result of, his return. The book of Revelation describes a time of total chaos that affects the physical universe as well as the social, economic, and political order of life on earth. Wars, famines, plagues, and economic disasters on a devastating scale will occur. This cosmic upheaval is described in three cycles of seven events in Revelation: the seven trumpets, the seven seals, and the seven bowls of God's wrath. These cycles are in parallel form; their description of the cosmic upheaval corresponds closely to the cosmic upheaval described by Christ in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 24:1–51; Mark 13:1–37; Luke 21:5–36). The Johannine literature, then, includes a major book that describes what is not included in John's Gospel but which the other Gospels had detailed. The detailed vision of the Lord's return appropriately comes through John, the last apostle to die, whose Gospel concludes with a question about the return, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?" (John 21:22).

The idea of the doom of the entire cosmos appears at other places in the New Testament as well. The entire created order will undergo a cataclysmic experience as the universe is consumed (Acts 2:19–20; Heb. 1:11–12; 2 Peter 3:7, 10). The thrust of these statements, however, is not so much God's destruction of creation as it is the coming of judgment because of humanity's devastation of God's creation. In the judgment, creation will actually be restored and renewed (Acts 3:21). Thus, it awaits eagerly the revealing of God's children at the judgment, when creation itself will be "liberated from its bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:18–22). The judgment will come when humanity has brought meaningful life on earth to an abysmal end.

*Accountability.* At his return, Christ will hold all human beings accountable for their lives. He himself will judge the world with justice as everyone gives an account of the stewardship of the life God has entrusted to them (Acts 17:31; Rom. 14:10–12). The apostles stress the justice, truth, and righteousness of God's judgment; he

renders to each person what he or she deserves (Rom. 2:2; 3:1–8; 2 Thess. 1:5–6; Heb. 2:2–3). Everyone will appear “before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10; cf. Rom. 2:7–8; 1 Peter 4:5; Rev. 20:10–15). The accounting will penetrate beneath one’s actions to their secret motives, so that what people consider as good God may account as corrupt (Rom. 1:18–2:16; 1 Cor. 4:4–5).

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

*Wrath and the problem of evil.* At the return of Christ, God’s wrath will be poured out on the godless and wicked who refuse to repent and receive the gospel (Rom. 1:18; 2:5; 2 Thess. 1:8–9). Because Jesus came to rescue people from the consequences of the judgment, those who oppose the gospel will experience the destructive nature of God’s wrath (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2:16). Only those prepared for the Lord’s return will escape his anger (1 Thess. 5:3, 9). God’s wrath will come for disobedience (Rom. 4:15; Eph. 5:6) and will do away with all that is wrong with human nature; therefore, Paul urged people to put to death through union with Christ’s death all that belonged to their human nature (Col. 3:5–6). Those who have toyed with Christ only to abandon the faith may expect the vengeance of God (Heb. 6:4–8; 10:26–31).

In the New Testament, the wrath of God settles the problem of evil. In its classic form the problem of evil concerns reconciling the idea of an all-powerful good God with the existence of evil. But evil does not exist as a self-existent reality; it only exists as an aspect of people. God has allowed the human race to exist for the benefit of those who repent of evil and turn in faith to God. In the end, however, God will destroy everyone who works against his righteous-

ness (Jude 5–7, 14–15; Rev. 6:10, 16; 14:14–20; 15:1–16:21; 19:1–21). Because of the universality of sin, condemnation is deserved (Rom. 3:8; 5:16), though Jesus Christ came to deliver people from condemnation (Rom. 8:34; 2 Thess. 2:12; cf. John 3:17–21).

*Salvation through Christ.* Though Christ will return as Judge, he will come to rescue his own people from any experience of God's wrath (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9). He himself will keep his people blameless and holy on the Day of Judgment (1 Cor. 1:7–8; 1 Thess. 3:13; 5:23). Christ took possession of those who have faith in him through his Holy Spirit, and by his Spirit he keeps his own until his return (Eph. 4:30; Phil. 1:6; 2 Tim. 1:12). When he returns, he will claim as his own all who await his appearance with faith, and on them he will bestow the promises of salvation (1 Cor. 15:23; Eph. 2:6–7; Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 4:14; Heb. 9:15, 27–28; 1 Peter 1:13). Those who have faith in Christ will have nothing to fear on the Day of Judgment, because in this life they have become like him (1 John 4:17). Since nothing impure can enter the presence of God, "only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" will enter the new Jerusalem, the abode of God (Rev. 21:27).

*Righteousness and faith.* As indicated earlier, righteousness serves as the standard for judgment. The critical question for individuals concerns how they might achieve righteousness. The apostles declared that the righteousness necessary to stand before God comes through one's assimilation into Jesus Christ, who defines righteousness (Rom. 5:15–21; Phil. 3:9–11). By his sacrificial death, Jesus satisfied the righteous requirements of the Law for all who through faith are crucified with him (Rom. 8:1–4). Those who continue in faith until his appearing will share in the promise made to Abraham, whom God counted righteous on the basis of his faith (3:21–6:23; Gal. 3–4). The gift of righteousness comes not so much as a possession to those who have faith as a spiritual transformation that comes with being a new creation in Christ (Eph. 4:24). Thus, believers live with the expectation that they will be counted righteous on the Day of Judgment by virtue of their relationship in Christ (2 Tim. 4:8). In the imagery of Revelation this experience of imputed righteousness is represented by "fine linen, bright and clean" garments of the bride of Christ, which is the church (Rev. 19:6–8). These clothes have been made white in the

blood of the Lamb and represent the righteous acts of the saints (7:14; 22:14).

*Perseverance.* While the apostles wrote many things about the return of Christ that had implications for salvation, they wrote to believers to encourage them to persevere because Jesus would return for his church. For those going through trials, suffering, and persecution, the return of Christ offered an encouragement to persevere in the faith (2 Thess. 2:13–17; Heb. 10:32–39; 1 John 2:28; Jude 17, 21; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 11, 12, 21) and to endure whatever they were facing, for when Christ appeared he would bring life, vindication, joy, and glory (James 1:12; 1 Peter 1:7; 2:23; 4:12–19; 5:1–11). The knowledge that the Lord would return instilled in the early Christians a need to persevere in holy living until that Day (Rom. 13:12; Gal. 6:8–9; Phil. 1:10; 1 Thess. 5:1–11; Titus 2:12–13; Heb. 11–12; 2 Peter 3:11–12). His return also stimulated the church to persevere in the work of ministry, in fellowship, in worship, in prayer, and in a lifestyle that led others to faith (2 Tim. 4:1–2a; Heb. 10:25; James 5:7–12; 1 Peter 2:12; 4:7).

*Church discipline.* Discipline within the church also has a relationship to the theme of judgment. The saints hand someone over to Satan to suffer physical harm in order that his or her spirit might be saved (1 Cor. 5:5). Though judgment will come on the world, the church has the obligation to judge itself within, to exercise appropriate discipline, and to settle disputes, because one day they will judge the world with Christ (5:9–13; 6:2). God himself exercises discipline over his children for the purpose of ensuring their place with Christ (Heb. 12:4–13; Rev. 3:19). On the other hand, because of the positive force of discipline in the context of a caring fellowship, Christians will boast of one another on the Day of the Lord (2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 2:16; 1 Thess. 2:19–20; 2 Thess. 1:4). In the context of fellowship and self-examination as Christians gather around the table of the Lord, they do so in anticipation of the Lord's return (1 Cor. 11:26).

*The age to come.* On the other side of the Day of the Lord is the age to come. Alluded to throughout the New Testament, it embodies the full expectation of what salvation means. With all the references to the kingdom of God in the Gospels in terms of how one enters it, the apostles speak very little about the age to come.

They held to the certainty of a new heaven and a new earth and the new Jerusalem (Heb. 13:14; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1–27). Christ has the exalted place with God in the age to come even though he does not appear to exercise dominion now (Eph. 1:9–10, 20–21; Heb. 2:5). Finally, the apostles know that all who love him will have a place in the kingdom when Christ returns (Eph. 2:6–7; James 2:5).

### **Observations**

In his teaching about the Day of Judgment, Jesus identifies himself as the Son of Man. He indicates that people will be responsible for a higher standard of righteousness than mere adherence to the Law and that judgment will be rendered on the basis of a person's basic nature as manifested in their behavior. He presents himself as the One who supplies the key to receiving the righteousness needed to appear before God.

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

## **HISTORICAL/THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT**

Despite the fact that Christ did not return immediately, the church never gave up its expectation of the Second Coming. In times of ease, it was a minor matter of faith to which Christians assented, but which played no significant role in the life of the church. In times of crisis and social change, however, the church remembered the prophecies and wondered if this might be the time.

### **The Montanist Movement**

The Montanist movement began during a period of persecution in the East (170–180). Jerome suggested that prior to his conversion Montanus had been a priest of the Cybele cult, which stressed divine

possession as well as an excessive, frenzied, ecstatic form of prophecy.<sup>4</sup> At his baptism, Montanus began to speak in tongues and prophecy. He had one basic message to deliver: The end of the world was near and the new Jerusalem would descend in his native land of Phrygia.

While Montanus stressed the ecstatic gifts of the Spirit as part of his ministry, that feature was not unique to him at the time. The dominant feature of his movement revolved around the expectation of the Lord's return, which included the practice of celibacy and high standards of ethics and morality. A feature of life in the last days included the acceptance of women in the role of prophet. At that early period, the church continued to believe that the Holy Spirit spoke through prophets.<sup>5</sup> In the Cybele cult women had also played a dominant role. Priscilla and Maximilla shared the prophetic ministry of Montanus, and their words were recorded with his concerning the descent of the new Jerusalem and the thousand-year reign of Christ. These women left their husbands to await the Second Coming.<sup>6</sup>

Montanus and his followers offered a model for the church in which Christians did not need the hierarchy of the developing church because they had direction from God, mediated by prophets whom the Holy Spirit inspired.<sup>7</sup> The Montanists in turn were attacked by the developing church structures, not as heretics but as a danger to order. With the return of Christ expected at any moment, and with prophets to reveal the will of God from the Holy Spirit, church structure, bishops, and clergy seemed unnecessary. In the face of pagan persecution and Christian opposition, the Montanists experienced the kind of suffering one would expect from reading Revelation about troubles for Christians just prior to Christ's return.

The Montanist movement played a significant role in discrediting the office of prophet in the church as bishops saw the claim of divine inspiration as a threat to order and doctrine. Thus, the church began to adopt the view that inspiration through prophets ended with the apostles.<sup>8</sup> The excesses of the movement encouraged the church to move away from its prophetic and ecstatic tradition conspicuous among the martyrs and toward a more hierarchical and ordered mode of institutional life. It also influenced the development of an allegorical method of biblical interpretation that did not take Scripture literally, as the Montanists had done with Revelation.<sup>9</sup>

Montanism became a widespread movement in the empire through the persecutions of 177 on. While the expectation faded of the descent of the new Jerusalem in Phrygia, the persecutions fueled the expectation that Christ would not wait long to return.<sup>10</sup> The strict morality of the Montanists, at a time when church discipline seemed lax by forgiving sins even as severe as apostasy, may have contributed to the popularity of the movement for those who desired high standards.<sup>11</sup> Tertullian accepted some Montanist teachings and propagated a view of asceticism based on his expectation of the Lord's early return. Montanism had a strong following in Egypt, which may have influenced the direction of the Desert Fathers, who lived their ascetic, hermit existence in expectation of the early return of Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Montanism faded with the end of persecution and the acceptance of Christianity in the empire, though it persisted in Montanus's native Phrygia, where Justinian used violent measures to suppress it four hundred years after Montanus. Even among those who did not hold Montanist views, the Second Coming was important during the persecutions. The expectation of the great overthrow of everything in heaven and earth at the end of time composed a significant piece of the evangelistic message to the Gauls from the time of Irenaeus in the second century until Lactantius in the fourth century.<sup>13</sup> With the emergence of Christendom as the new order in the West, however, Augustine's theology of the Millennium replaced the earlier view of a dramatic interruption of history. He taught that the book of Revelation should be understood allegorically, for the Millennium was coming to pass through Christ's reign in the church.<sup>14</sup>

### The Middle Ages

The Sibylline oracles appeared during the last days of the old Roman empire, following the ascendancy of Constantius, the son of Constantine, who favored the Arian party. The *Tiburtina* foretold a future golden age when an emperor would appear to reunite East and West and bring an end to the tyranny of heretics. The people of Gog and Magog would then rebel, precipitating the final crisis before the rise of Antichrist and the Second Coming.<sup>15</sup> The Christian Sibylline literature rested on a tradition of pagan oracles, of the same Cybele cult to which Montanus had belonged, and of Jewish manipulations of the Sibylline oracle form for proselytizing purposes.<sup>16</sup>

In the seventh century, a second Sibylline oracle appeared, *Pseudo-Methodius*, purporting to have been written by the fourth-century martyr, Methodius of Patara. It contained a similar prophecy about a great emperor who would appear, but this time to conquer the Ishmaelites (Muslims) who had seized one Christian territory after another.<sup>17</sup> Then the final conflict would begin before the Second Coming. This Sibylline tradition would have continuing influence for a thousand years in the politics of emperors and kings both in the East and the West, who had ambitions of greatness.

The Sibylline oracles seem to have provided background for the tone of the first crusade, which Pope Urban II intended in order to bring some relief to Byzantium in Asia Minor and in so doing to gain acknowledgment of papal supremacy in the East. A crusade would also provide an outlet for the energies spent on innumerable feudal conflicts of the time. But the crusade was largely usurped by the masses of poor who, inspired by the apocalyptic messages of preachers like Peter the Hermit, committed all manner of atrocities against Muslims and Jews. The masses saw the crusade as the last great battle, which would reveal the last great emperor from among the eligible Christian princes.<sup>18</sup>

Even the apocalyptic ministry of Savonarola had roots in the Sibylline oracles of the end times. It was in Florence, the humanist capital of the world, that Savonarola's warnings of impending doom struck their mark. Charles VIII of France represented himself as the long-expected last emperor of Sibylline fame, who would conquer the world in preparation for the return of Christ. He began his adventures by invading Italy in 1494, aiming for Florence. In this atmosphere, Savonarola preached about the coming judgment, and the people of Florence responded by driving out the ruling Medici family. Savonarola negotiated a peaceful submission to Charles and set about erecting a godly republican government. The monk's prophetic warnings turned more optimistic as Florence now became the vehicle for the dawning of the Millennium following the defeat of Antichrist.<sup>19</sup> The message was optimistic, however, only for those who repented and turned to God, for judgment was near:

I have said to you: "The sword of the Lord will come upon the earth swiftly and soon." Believe me that the sword of God will

come in a short time. Do not laugh at this “in a short time,” and say it is the “short time” of Revelation which needs hundred of years to come. Believe me that it is soon.<sup>20</sup>

In 1495 Savonarola wrote a *Compendium of Revelations* to demonstrate the accuracy of his prophecies. By 1498, however, Charles had withdrawn from Italy, and the Medici pope, Alexander IV, intended to bring Savonarola’s influence to an end. In the face of changing political and economic realities, the citizens of Florence turned against the Dominican and burned him at the stake in the public square.

A second major theme in the Middle Ages related to the return of Christ concerns the study of Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135–1202). This man gained a wide reputation as a biblical scholar with great insight into the interpretation of the prophecies about the end times. He divided human history into three dispensations: the age of the Father, the age of the Son, and the age of the Holy Spirit.<sup>21</sup> He taught that the history of the world from creation to the time of Jesus comprised seven periods and that the time forward from the time of Jesus to the Second Coming would also involve seven periods. He identified the first dispensation of seven periods with the Father and the second with the Son. But this scheme created a problem in providing the Holy Spirit with a temporal sphere of influence. Joachim resolved the problem by assigning to the Holy Spirit the seventh period of the Son’s dispensation. As the seventh period, or Sabbath, it need not have the same fixed duration as the other six periods.<sup>22</sup>

Joachim expected Christ to come, intervene in history, and destroy the Antichrist. He calculated the coming of Christ based on Daniel 12:7, 11, 12, which speaks of 1260, 1290, and 1335 “days” respectively. Joachim took the days to mean years, which he numbered from the birth of Christ, concluding that the return would occur in 1260, 1290, or 1335.<sup>23</sup> He saw a correlation between contemporary events and the rise of Antichrist, who had followers alternatively considered to be Saladin, Emperor Frederick II, and Alfonso of Castille.<sup>24</sup>

Though widely respected and sanctioned by the Pope, Joachim was condemned by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). His scheme provided intellectual credibility to the conviction that God is not

remote from Christians but intimately present through the Holy Spirit. The system set up conflict, however, between those who accepted it and saw themselves as model people of the final age of the Holy Spirit, and those who rejected it and therefore had to be considered agents of Antichrist.<sup>25</sup> Joachim's concept of three dispensations could not be reconciled with the officially accepted Augustinian understanding that there would be no millennial reign of Christ on earth except through the church, but his scheme certainly fit the popular theology influenced by the Sibylline oracles.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the condemnation of Joachim, he continued to be popular, particularly among the mendicants, who believed his references to the two orders of spiritual men who would bring in the kingdom referred to the Dominicans and Franciscans. The "Spiritual" Franciscans in particular saw the transition to the third dispensation as coinciding with the ministry of Francis of Assisi. In 1254 Gerard of Borgo San Donnino wrote *Introduction to the Eternal Gospel*, in which he declared that the last age, the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, would begin in 1260. Following Joachim's scheme, he taught that the Spiritual Franciscans, who followed the original intent of St. Francis, would be the instruments for the coming of the new age.<sup>27</sup> The publication of this book caused such a stir that the church removed John of Parma from office as Minister General of the Franciscan Order and replaced him with Bonaventure. For his part Gerard suffered life imprisonment.

### **The Reformation Ease**

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

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

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

The city of Münster had a population of about 15,000 when its troubles began. Religious deviation began in 1531 when Bernard Rothmann, a young Catholic priest, began preaching Lutheran doctrine. Despite opposition by the bishop, the guilds supported Rothmann and forced the town council to install Lutheran ministries in all the churches. Rothmann's religious pilgrimage did not end there, however, for by 1533 he had become an Anabaptist. His sympathizers on the town council granted liberty of conscience to Anabaptists, setting the stage for a massive influx of Anabaptists. They flocked to Münster, expecting to be saved in the new Jerusalem while the rest of the world was being destroyed sometime before Easter 1534. As a result, the Anabaptists won a great victory in the town council election of February 23, 1534.<sup>28</sup>

The Anabaptists then expelled the Lutherans and Catholics to cleanse the city. In return, the Lutherans and Catholics lay siege to the city, beginning on February 28. Within the walls Jan Matthys assumed theocratic control, executing enemies and abolishing private ownership of money and property. He died leading an assault on the besiegers. Jan Bockelson succeeded Matthys and soon introduced polygamy to the community before arranging his accession as King of the new Jerusalem. He enforced his apocalyptic rule with frequent executions. This episode finally ended June 24, 1535, with

a successful assault on the city. The conquering army exterminated virtually all those still alive in the city.

During the rise of Puritanism, with the English church party intent on completing the Reformation in England, Joseph Mede (1585–1638) attracted attention for his study of Revelation and his conclusions about the coming Millennium. Concerns about the end of time were ripe during the Reformation period because for a thousand years the church in the West had followed Augustine's view that the Millennium coincided with the church. If Satan was bound in the fifth or sixth century, then the political, economic, social, and religious chaos of Europe a thousand years later was evidence that Satan was once again loose and the end of the world was drawing near. Mede broke with this scholarly tradition, however, and taught that the Millennium had not yet begun.<sup>29</sup>

From the time of Henry VIII's break with Rome, the English government and church had encouraged identifying the pope as the Antichrist. The memory of the Lollards who had made the same identification no doubt aided in popularizing the view. Besides Mede, several other scholars promoted millennial speculations. Thomas Brightman published a commentary on Revelation in 1609. Johannes Alsted taught that the first three vials of Revelation were poured out between 1517 and 1625, with the last judgment expected about 1694. John Napier, the Scottish inventor of logarithms, calculated the fall of Rome as 1639 and the end of the world about 1688. By the 1630s and early 1640s the Puritans had decided that the reign of the beast and the Antichrist included the despised Archbishop Laud and the Church of England.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to earlier millenarian works, Thomas Goodwin's sermon *A Glimpse of Zion's Glory* was preached by someone who stood close to the new power brokers of Civil War England. Goodwin's reading of Revelation had influenced his move from Presbyterian thought to Independency activism. No mere demagogue, Goodwin came to a strong conviction about the congregational form of church government, which he regarded as the beginning of the kingdom of Christ.<sup>31</sup> Millenarian themes like those sounded by Goodwin became a main feature of sermons preached before the Long Parliament, setting the tone for their deliberations. As the Parliamentary Army became increasingly independent in its ecclesiol-

ogy, the millennial views made respectable by scholars the caliber of Goodwin, who became both president of Magdalen College and chaplain to Cromwell, had a ring of respectability. Prophetesses like Lady Eleanor Douglas and Mary Cary joined divines like John Owen in viewing the execution of King Charles I as a necessary move to make way for the reign of Christ.<sup>32</sup>

By the early 1650s millenarianism had developed a radical streak that sought the overthrow of all remnants of the “fourth monarchy.” Among the Independents during the Civil War and Commonwealth, a number of soldiers accepted the view that the four world empires of Daniel 2 and 7 had ended. The fourth empire, Rome, had apparently lived on in its constituent parts, but the “fifth monarchy” or the reign of Jesus would soon begin.<sup>33</sup> These fifth monarchists differed from the earlier Puritan millenarians in three respects: They believed that they had the responsibility to clear the way for the fifth monarchy rather than waiting for God to do so; they identified by name contemporary figures in English life whom they believed were mentioned in biblical prophecy; and they developed a plan for the structure of Christ’s coming kingdom.<sup>34</sup>

When Cromwell dissolved the Barebones Parliament in 1653, the fifth monarchists also consigned Cromwell’s government to Antichrist and plotted its demise. Thomas Venner, one of the most brilliant among them, planned to overthrow the government, but the plot was discovered and Venner went to the Tower until 1659.<sup>35</sup> After the Restoration, Venner attempted a second rising, which the government put down violently. John Bunyan’s imprisonment and the severe persecution of all non-Conformists followed on the heels of the abortive fifth monarchy rising.<sup>36</sup> The failure of the armed rising influenced the Quakers to abandon their earlier radicalism and adopt a policy of pacifism, for which they became well known.<sup>37</sup>

### The Third Rome

In the East, the continuation of the empire had as much importance for the divine plan of salvation as the existence of the church. Everyone knew that Rome was the fourth and last empire of the book of Daniel and that it would witness the return of Christ. With the fall of Byzantium to the Turks in 1453, however, Eastern Christianity entered a crisis. The expectation arose that the end of the

world would come in 1492, seven thousand years after the accepted date of the creation of the world.<sup>38</sup> So convinced was it that the end of the world would come in that year that the Russian Church did not prepare a calendar beyond 1492. The end of the seventh millennium had particular import, coinciding as it did with the end of the empire, since there had only been seven councils, seven sacraments, seven days, and seven pillars of wisdom.<sup>39</sup>

When the end did not come, Metropolitan Zosimus prepared new Easter tables for the calendar and declared the dawn of a new Christian era with a new Constantine and a new Constantinople. Just as the political and spiritual legacy of Rome had passed to Constantinople, the Russians believed that Rome continued in Moscow. This understanding of Moscow as the third Rome was first articulated by Starets Filofey of Pskov. The view quickly gained acceptance as the only possible interpretation of events. Thus, Grand Duke Ivan III of Moscow (1462–1505) became Tsar of Russia, the Russian equivalent of Caesar. He married the niece of the last Byzantine emperor and claimed the insignia of Byzantium, the two-headed eagle, as the standard of the new Rome.<sup>40</sup> On the basis of this understanding of the prophecies of the end times, the metropolitan of Moscow assumed the office of patriarch, which the four patriarchs of the Orthodox Church confirmed in 1589.<sup>41</sup>

Moscow became the only city of Eastern Christianity ruled over by a Christian prince after the fall of Byzantium. The reorientation of Orthodox Christianity from Constantinople to Moscow occurred during the same hundred-year period as the Protestant Reformation. The Russian empire, newly independent of the Tarter yoke, began with a perceived divine mandate to continue the life and work of the Byzantine empire with specific reference to the defense and advance of the faith. To explain the disastrous fall of Constantinople, the seat of Christianity, the Russian Church concluded that God had punished the emperor and the patriarch of Constantinople for entering into communion with Rome at the Council of Florence (1439) in a bid for military aid. Though God had punished Constantinople for this, he had not ended the fourth empire but had transferred it to Moscow, because of the Russian devotion to God.<sup>42</sup>

So strong was the belief in Moscow as the third Rome, both politically and spiritually, that a great schism occurred in 1653, when

Patriarch Nikon ordered a revision of the Russian liturgy and customs to conform with those of the Greek Church. Regarding the Greek Church as corrupt, proven by its punishment by God for its relations with Rome, the "Old Believers" broke with the patriarch and refused to make changes. Archpriest Avvakum, who led the initial opposition to the reforms, concluded that the "time of suffering" had come.<sup>43</sup> To accept reform meant rejecting Moscow's place as the third Rome. This being the case, the third Rome had fallen and there was no empire left to be a fourth Rome; therefore, the end of the world must be coming soon. For supporting the reforms and inspiring the new social order, Tsar Alexis earned the epithet of Antichrist.<sup>44</sup>

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

In 1667, a council that included both Russian bishops and several Orthodox patriarchs deposed Nikon. Instead of nullifying his reforms, however, the council condemned all who refused to follow the changes. The important monastery of Solovki refused the instructions, which resulted in an eight-year siege, from 1667 until 1676. The Tsar's forces killed all but fourteen of the two hundred monks when the siege finally ended. The government action only increased the conviction of the Old Believers that the reign of Antichrist had begun.<sup>45</sup>

It was a time of apocalyptic expectation. The hermit Kapiton had gained a wide following at the beginning of the seventeenth century through his teaching that since the Antichrist was already ruling, the world would soon end.<sup>46</sup> Under the regency of Sophia, elder sister of Peter the Great, Old Believers routinely suffered death as enemies of the state and its church. Some of the more militant Old Believers, in following Kapiton's teaching, not only sought martyrdom, but even committed suicide. The 2700 Old Believers who seized the Paleostrovskii Monastery set the chapel afire and died in the flames. A similar incident happened at Berezovna Volok. In place after place, Old Believers burned themselves alive for fear that their faith would fail if captured by the forces of Antichrist. This episode finally ended through the influence of Evfrosin, who

taught that Christ provided the faithful only two options in persecution: flight or martyrdom. Suicide was not an option, for it betrayed a lack of faith.<sup>47</sup>

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

### **American Christianity**

Concern about the Second Coming had figured prominently in American Christianity since the time of the Puritans. Jonathan Edwards held to a postmillennialism that taught that Christ would create the Millennium through his church before his return.<sup>48</sup>

*Dispensationalism.* By the end of the tumultuous nineteenth century, however, a growing number of evangelicals began to reject postmillennialism for a premillennial view. The most widespread transdenominational premillennial movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is dispensationalism. John Darby (1800–1882) developed the dispensational framework of history with its eight covenants and seven dispensations or ages.<sup>49</sup> Among the unique and controversial features of this system are the pretribulation rapture of the church, whereby Christians will escape the persecution and suffering of the Tribulation, and the separate ways God deals with Israel and the church.<sup>50</sup>

Dispensationalism spread quickly through the Bible conference movement of the late nineteenth century, beginning with the Niagara Bible Conference of 1875. These gatherings led to conferences on Bible prophecy, which dispensationalists dominated. Dwight L. Moody adopted dispensational views early in his ministry, and most of the major evangelists of the next hundred years followed his lead. Seminaries, on the other hand, viewed dispensationalism with alarm. James Snowden's survey of seminaries in 1919 found that only seven of the 236 professors surveyed in twenty-eight seminaries held dispensational views. Rather than discrediting dispensationalism, however, this study tended to discredit seminaries among

believers in the growing fundamentalist-dispensationalist camp.<sup>51</sup> Schools like Moody Bible Institute, Columbia Bible College, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA) were founded in large part because of the growing disenchantment with the old seminaries and divinity schools.

The crowning achievement in the spread of dispensationalism probably came with the publication of C. I. Scofield's reference Bible, with copious notes explaining the Bible in terms of its covenants and showing the continuity of Scripture from one dispensation to the next. This Bible plus the visual aids that dispensationalists produced, such as timelines and charts, made the Bible understandable to the average layperson at a time when seminaries had become enamored with a critical approach to Scripture, which made the Bible either more obscure or more mundane. The wars of the twentieth century and the establishment of an independent Jewish state after nearly two thousand years have encouraged serious consideration of dispensational teaching, especially at the height of the Cold War. Dispensationalists also pointed to the theological liberalism of the American Protestant establishment as a fulfillment of the biblical warning of the proliferation of false teachers in the last days.<sup>52</sup>

*Cult groups.* While dispensationalism operates across denominational lines within orthodox Christianity, several significant religious groups have emerged that depart from the orthodox faith over an initial concern about the Second Coming. Mother Ann Lee gained a following through the teaching of revelations she claimed to have had, beginning in 1770. The Shakers believed the Second Coming was actually a second incarnation, with Ann Lee as the second visitation of the Messiah. They believed that the Millennium began in 1792, through the foundation of the Shakers.<sup>53</sup>

Joseph Smith claimed that he received the Book on Mormon as a preparation for the second coming of the Messiah. Organized April 6, 1830, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints came into being to gather the saints for the thousand-year reign. Smith told his followers that they would live to see the Second Coming, but that the saints must first create a colony worthy of the Lord.<sup>54</sup>

William Miller, a Baptist preacher without formal training, developed his own understanding of biblical prophecy, concluding that the Second Coming would occur October 22, 1844. Through a

series of conferences, preaching tours, and periodicals, his teachings became well known. He gained both a following and an opposition. After 1844 passed without incident, the Adventist group developed out of his followers.<sup>55</sup> Charles Taze Russell was influenced by the Adventists to start a Bible study group to determine God's plan for the world and humanity. In 1876 he became pastor of the group that became the nucleus of Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>56</sup>

### THE RETURN OF CHRIST AS GOOD NEWS

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

#### **Chaos**

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

The chaos that afflicts "this present evil age" already stands condemned. At his return, Christ will exercise judgment over the chaos. For those who live as victims of the chaos at whatever level, or for those who grieve over the chaos, the return of Christ offers good news that God cares and has already set a time to set things in order.

### **Accountability**

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

### **Evil**

The cry to God also comes in the plaintive cry “Why?” How can evil abound when God exists? Why does God allow evil? Why do bad things happen to good people? People do not merely ask the question intellectually; they experience the question emotionally. The Bible discusses the issue in numerous places, such as the Psalms, Job, Romans 8, the story of Joseph, and to a certain extent the entire history of Israel. The sufferings of innocent Jesus culminate the problem with respect to the sovereign Creator, for God himself stood in the position of those who must sit and watch the one they love suffer.<sup>57</sup> People experience the problem at the micro level, the level of their personal experience, in all of eternity. God resolves the problem at the macro level, the point at which time and space are rolled up like a scroll. At the return of Christ, evil will be no more. Rather than supply a philosophical explanation until then, the gospel simply affirms that evil and its causes will be consumed. For those who suffer and those who must watch, the return of Christ offers good news that God will wipe it all away along with the tears.

### **Rescue**

From beginning to end, Christian faith revolves around a Savior who rescues. Unlike the civil religion of America that stresses self-reliance, the Christian faith stresses a dependency on Christ that will culminate in rescue when he returns. Unlike a morbid psychological dependency that robs people of their independence, dependence on

Christ frees people to act responsibly until his return. Instead of the idolatry of human dependence, dependence on Christ frees one from defending the chaos of the world. Instead of the fear of death, destruction, and oblivion, the gospel teaches that Christ will return to rescue those who love him from the final judgment of the present world order. For those who see the end coming and recognize that human initiatives to create great world orders only intensify the problem, the return of Christ offers good news that God will intervene to rescue the beloved.

### **Justification**

Many people struggle to justify their existence. They have had a chance at life, but have they made the most of it? Was their life valid and worthwhile? Do they have a right to exist? The problem of justifying one's existence is complicated if one also has a conscience that still functions well enough to generate guilt and fear over past actions. As a result, the idea of a final accounting can fill people with great dread. The gospel teaches that at the return of Christ, the lives of his followers will be justified on the basis of his life instead of their own.<sup>58</sup> In other words, those who fear the judgment because of their sin can escape condemnation on the basis of the righteousness of Christ. Sin was condemned and destroyed on the cross for all those who died with him; therefore, they will stand justified at the judgment.

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

with a suicidal person, one need not fear raising the issue of judgment with a teenager. Their consciences still work. For those who fear the prospect of judgment and condemnation, the return of Christ offers good news that he will justify us.

### **Perseverance and Reward**

The return of Christ culminates in the reward of the kingdom. All that eternal life with God will bring, which no mortal can fathom, lies out before those whom Christ gathers to himself at the judgment. Christianity is not a world-denying religion like Hinduism, nor does it deny the reality of suffering as Buddhism does. On the contrary, Christ promises his followers that they can expect suffering in this world. On the other side of judgment, however, lies the reward of faithfulness to Christ. Eternity with him is the reward for wanting to spend eternity with him. Those who do not want to spend eternity with Christ will not have to do it.

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

### **NOTES**

1. In Islam, the judgment will be carried on by a tribunal that also includes Moses and Mohammed.
2. This issue intensified during the late intertestamental period when such works as the *Book of Jubilees*, the *Parables of Enoch*, and the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* appeared.

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

4. Michael J. St. Clair, *Millenarian Movements in Historical Context* (New York: Garland, 1992), 80.

5. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 1:128–29.

6. St. Clair, *Millenarian Movements*, 82.

7. Theodore Olson, *Millennialism, Utopianism, and Progress* (Buffalo: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1982), 93.

8. Latourette, *History of Christianity*, 1:134.

9. St. Clair, *Millenarian Movements*, 85–86.

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

11. Latourette, *History of Christianity*, 1:138, 216.

12. *Ibid.*, 1:225.

13. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 29.

14. *Ibid.*, 29.

15. *Ibid.*, 31.

16. Bernard McGin, "Teste David Cum Sibylla: The Significance of the Sibylline Tradition in the Middle Ages," in *Apocalypticism in the Western Tradition* (Brookfield, Vt.: Variorum, 1994), 4:7–16. McGin gives an overview of the career of the Sibyle from pagan times.

17. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 32.

18. *Ibid.*, 61–88.

19. Bernard McGin, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1979), 277–78.

20. *Ibid.*, 280.

21. St. Clair, *Millenarian Movements*, 100.

22. Olson, *Millennialism, Utopianism, and Progress*, 112–16.

23. *Ibid.*, 120 n.17.

24. St. Clair, *Millenarian Movements*, 101.

25. Olson, *Millennialism, Utopianism, and Progress*, 125, 127.

26. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 109.

27. Rufus M. Jones, *The Eternal Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 3.

28. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 258–62; St. Clair, *Millenarian Movements*, 172–73.

29. Olson, *Millennialism, Utopianism, and Progress*, 199–200.

30. B. S. Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 27–36.
31. Tai Liu, *Discord in Zion: The Puritan Divines and the Puritan Revolution 1640–1660* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 4–7.
32. Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men*, 50–51.
33. D. H. Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), 180–81.
34. B. S. Capp, “Extreme Millenarianism,” in *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel*, ed. Peter Toon (London: James Clarke, 1970), 68.
35. *Ibid.*, 84.
36. Christopher Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 105.
37. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Viking, 1972), 194.
38. Nicholas Zernov, *Eastern Christendom* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961), 140.
39. Ernst Benz, *The Eastern Orthodox Church: Its Thought and Life*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Chicago: Aldine, 1963), 181.
40. *Ibid.*, 181–82.
41. Zernov, *Eastern Christendom*, 141; see also Nicolas Zernov, *Moscow the Third Rome* (New York: AMS Press, 1971), 48.
42. Zernov, *Moscow the Third Rome*, 31–35.
43. For an account of Avvakum’s life, see Serge Zenkousky, ed., *Medieval Russia’s Epics, Chronicles, and Tales* (New York: Dutton, 1963), 322–70.
44. Robert O. Crummey, *The Old Believers and the World of Antichrist* (Madison, Wis.: The Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1970), 14.
45. *Ibid.*, 4, 19–20.
46. *Ibid.*, 7.
47. *Ibid.*, 45–47, 56. See also Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: American Review of Eastern Orthodoxy, 1935), 210.
48. Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), 13–14.
49. C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1945), 1, 3 n.4–5.
50. Weber, *Living in the Shadow*, 21.
51. *Ibid.*, 27–33.
52. *Ibid.*, 87.

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

54. *Ibid.*, 177–81.

55. *Ibid.*, 194.

56. See Melvin D. Curry, "Jehovah's Witnesses," in *Cults and Non-conventional Religious Groups*, ed. J. Gordon Melton (New York: Garland, 1992), *passim*.

57. I am indebted to Frank Tupper for this insight.

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