

SPIRITUAL WARFARE, CHRIST'S IMMINENT RETURN
AND CHRIST'S MANDATE TO HIS CHURCH

BY

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PROLOGUE

Is the church engaged in following the scriptural mandates Christ gave to His church? As His disciples are we busy carrying His Word to the lost, striving to make more disciples, despite ever intensifying temporal and spiritual warfare? Or are we merely participating in “pop” preaching, centered on a second-rate salvation with worthless worship, fostering an “all about me” attitude? Surely God's visible church is not a group of policy-holders waiting for *the certain catastrophe* to come so we can collect on our *fire insurance*.

Rather we need to be engulfed in Christ's primeval charge in these last days, “[to]. . . go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:19). Hopefully we are doing all of this with love? A love the world can see.

There are three multi-faceted, foundational questions this paper will ask and attempt to answer. *Firstly*, Is Christ's return imminent? Does it matter? *Secondly*, are we really involved in spiritual warfare? If so, what form does it take? *Lastly*, as the extant church, are we adhering to Christ's mandate to His Church or are we merely salesmen pitching *fire insurance*? In other words, are we *engaging* the postmodern world or *engulfed* by it?

SPIRITUAL WARFARE IN THE WORLD

THE STAR AND THE CRESCENT MOON

The streets are packed with jubilant, triumphant people celebrating. Jostling up and down, yelling, whooping with raised hands, in the air. The racket was incredible. The news networks would replay this scene repeatedly; for days—even weeks.

Catastrophe! Calamity! What a horrendous disaster. Nothing in the world had *ever* happened like this before. It was a beautiful day—clear as a bell. How could a jet liner accidentally hit a building that big? Yet, barely twenty minutes later; a second plane breached the *South Tower* creating a second blazing firestorm; its pungent black smoke billowing skyward to join the smoke already pouring from an equally intense inferno in the *North Tower*. The World Trade Center was dying. Like the firestorm engulfing Twin Towers, the revolting reality began burning in our minds—America was under attack!

Thousands of people were struggling to stay alive or help others stay alive and flee the conflagration. Bodies and debris plummeted to the ground, pursued by thick gray ash descending from the twin funeral pyres. For over 3,000 souls that entered the North or South Tower on that morn, the premise of *Dante's Inferno* became a reality: *Abandon all hope, ye who [have entered] here.*

Half-a-world away tens of thousands of our fellow human beings, from Palestine, Iraq, Iran, and other Muslim strongholds, continued to rejoice at these horrific scenes being broadcast around the world in real time. This attack from without was *more* than an attack on America; it was also an assault on the Christian worldview.

The Holy Land has seethed since the milieu of Ishmael and Isaac; now however, it is boiling over scalding the entire world with its vitriol, vehemence, and violence. On that fateful day, September 11, 2001, our world was forever changed. Al-Qaeda and Islam had brought the curved, blood-streaked, scimitar of Muhammad to America. If the bombing of Pearl Harbor was the “day that shall live in infamy;” *911 is the abomination of the age!*”

Everett Hyland, has lived to witness both events. Hyland radioman aboard the Pennsylvania, which was in Dry Dock No. 1 when Pearl Harbor was hit says, “not that everyone sees similarities between the two attacks. ‘There is no comparison,’ Hyland said. ‘[911] was terrorists killing a pile of civilians. Here [at Pearl Harbor], you had professional fighters versus professional fighters. Two different things [sic]’” (Associated Press, 12/7/06).

Robert Spencer, the director of **Jihad Watch**, writes in his newly released book *The Truth About Muhammad*; “A tiny minority of extremists has supposedly hijacked the religion [Islam], but *jihadist Muslims won elections in the Palestinian Authority and elsewhere*. The new, American-backed Iraqi and Afghan constitutions have enshrined sharia, Islamic law, (which includes the *death penalty for Christian converts*), as the highest law of the land. And the vast majority of peaceful Muslims show no signs of resisting or condemning the global Islamic jihad that is being fought in their name”¹ (italics mine).

SATAN’S SCIMITAR OR CHRIST’S CROSS?

The religion of Islam is diametrically opposed to Christianity. Allah is *not* the same God as the God of Christianity. Allah is *not* the One True God. Allah is a cold, dead, idol. The Qur’ān is *not* the Word of God. How do we know it is not God’s Word? One has only to compare the Qur’ān to the Bible.

Teachings from the Qur’ān

The following are Suras from this unholy book of the religion of peace, Islam:

Sura 9:5

“Then, when the sacred months have passed, **slay the idolaters** [non-Muslims] **wherever ye find them**, and **take them** (captive), and **besiege them**, and **prepare for them each an ambush** [bold mine]. But if they repent and establish worship and pay the poor-due, then leave their way free.”

Sura 9:30

“And the Jews say: ‘Ezra is the son of Allah;’ and the Christians say: ‘The Messiah is the son of Allah; . . .’ may Allah destroy them; how they are turned away!”

Sura 8:12

Again the Qur’ān reads, “I will cast a dread into the hearts of infidels. **Strike off their heads** then, and **strike off from them every finger-tip**.”²

Where is the peace in these passages? There is none unless it is in their “paradise.” In truth, there is *no salvation* or peace in Islam. Islam *is* a religion of hate, violence and murder.

What the Bible Teaches

What does the Bible teach? “You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, . . .” (Matt. 5:43, 44). The Bible tells us, “‘YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets” (Matt.

22:37, 40). Jesus taught, “. . . bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back” (Luke 6:28-30). The Holy Scriptures declare, “Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8).

The verses above from *both* the Qur’ān and the Bible are *prescriptive*, not *descriptive*. The comparison between the Bible, the true Word of God, and the idolatrous, fictional, god of Mohammed readily illuminates which is the *true* religion of peace. The Middle East is a boiling cauldron of murderous hate and seething anti-Semitism initiated by Muslims. One has only to take note of the events currently transpiring in the Middle East and to look at the crumbling societal mores worldwide to begin to realize world history is being poured into God’s mold and being readied for a last purifying inferno at the end of time.

SCIMITAR AT OUR THROAT

Islam is attacking us from within as well. The politically correct brainwashing has polluted the Highest Office of the land and trickled down through out all of government. On a October 16, 2006, President G.W. Bush said in a speech at the sixth consecutive Iftaar dinner held at the White House; “For Muslims in America and around the world, Ramadan is a special time of prayer and fasting, contemplation of God's greatness, and charity and service to those in need. And for people of all faiths, it is a good time to reflect on the values we hold in common, including love of family, gratitude to God, the importance of community, and a commitment to tolerance and religious freedom. . . . *We honor the many Islamic nations that America is proud to call friends.* And we renew the ties of friendship that should bind all who *trace their faith back to God's call on Abraham*” (italics mine).³

Paul Sperry in his book *Infiltration* penned these distressing words.

The president sets the tone throughout the government. . . . starting with President Clinton, who . . . said the American people need to know that terrorism is not a Muslim thing: . . . President Bush considers Islam a “great religion,” . . . whenever he mentions “churches and synagogues” in any speech [now], he is quick to add “mosques.” He has promised Muslim leaders he will refrain from using the word Islamic to describe terrorism

A week after 9/11, Bush visited a mosque in Washington, . . . Outside at a press conference, he pleaded for Americans to “respect” Muslims and Islam’s teaching of “peace.” . . . A week later, Bush met with Muslim leaders, this time *at the White House*. At the close of a prayer led by a *Wahhabi imam*, Bush offered the words “*Ameen*,” Arabic for “Amen,” *not realizing he was praying to a different God*.

Then on the eve of the first anniversary of 9/11, he praised Islam as a loving faith that no American should fear. . . . “All Americans must recognize the face of terror is not the true face of Islam, . . . *Islam is a faith based on love, not hate*” (italics mine).⁴

Yet another example of the “Islamofascist inside” comes from a Washington Times article dated October 3, 2006, written by Frank Gaffney,

American prisons, military units, college campuses and mosques continue to be used with impunity for Islamist recruitment and indoctrination. Organizations like the Council on American Islamic Relations that are -- at the very least -- sympathetic to our Islamofascist foes are charged with providing "sensitivity training" to FBI agents on how to "reach out" to Muslims. Senior State Department personnel are among the Republican and Democratic officials who regularly meet with and rely upon representatives of organizations that should be under surveillance, rather than treated as legitimate interlocutors with "moderate" Muslims. Unsurprisingly, neither party is even proposing, let alone waging, a competent program of anti-Islamist ideological warfare.

John Loftus former Federal Prosecutor warns, “The infiltration of radical Islam is *so* deep, it’s shocking.”⁵ We *must* recognize that in the *corporeal war on terror* and the *cold war on terror* are both forms of spiritual warfare waged by Satan against Christ’s temporal church.

The newly ensconced Obama administration seems to be working overtime to meltdown our defenses against Islamic imperialism on the same scale it is using to meltdown our economy. In his villainous speech in Cairo Obama declared, “[Islam has] carried the light of learning through so many centuries, paving the way for Europe's Renaissance and Enlightenment.” He went on to extol “innovation in Muslim communities that developed the order of algebra; our magnetic compass and tools of navigation; our mastery of pens and printing; our understanding of how disease spreads and how it can be healed.”

This is nothing less than revisionist tripe. Robert Spencer, an authority on Islam and Jihad writes, “the idea that Islamic culture was once a beacon of learning and enlightenment is a commonly held myth. In fact, much of this has been exaggerated, often for quite transparent apologetic motives.”

Nevertheless, Islam⁶ is but *one front* in the massive number of battles that make up the Spiritual War arrayed against the West and against the Christian Church. The tares that have infested the worldview of the west did not sprout suddenly. Like many endemic outbreaks they have spread silently, destroying crucial beliefs that undergird our society.

SEEDS OF TARES

The seeds of this crop of tares were planted over 100 years ago in the fertile fields of the Enlightenment by Charles Darwin, Karl Marx and German Philosopher and atheist, Friedrich Nietzsche; who were contemporaries. Darwin discovered a theory to counter the Creation paradigm and eliminate The Creator. Marx expanded evolutionary theory to the “common man” with his *Communist Manifesto* and Nietzsche declared God dead: “We have killed God.”⁷ “But Nietzsche’s atheism was the most radical the world had yet seen. “While the old atheism acknowledged the need for religion, the new atheism is political, activist, and jealous. . . . ‘atheism has become militant . . . insisting it must be believed.’ . . . The devaluation of all values

is what the death of God has meant . . . distinctions between right and wrong, justice and injustice have become meaningless.”⁸

Francis Schaeffer expands on these thoughts, “The enlightenment was . . . an intellectual movement which emphasized the sufficiency of human reason and skepticism concerning the validity of the traditional authority of the past. . . . This could be summed up in a few words: The central ideas of the Enlightenment stand in complete antithesis to Christian truth. More than this, they are an attack on God himself and his character.”⁹ In the “modern” era this flawed philosophical path was tread by John Dewey. In one of his many published works, *A Common Faith*, Dewey wrote, “Here are all the arguments for a religious faith [of humanism]. . . . Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant.”¹⁰

KERNELS OF DESTRUCTION

Civilization and the Church is now reaping this harvest of tares, planted so long ago. Take note of the kernels this country has reaped: nearly 60 million babies *murdered* in the name of a woman’s right to choose death for another; The Ten Commandments and prayer *abolished* from schools and the public arena; *sex* openly *flaunted* in almost all forms of media and the attendant *bastard birth-rate* throughout society; homosexuality presented to our children as just *another alternative lifestyle*; time-honored, traditional marriage is being ruthlessly mugged; yet homosexuality is nearing civil right status; black robed jurists time and again frustrate the will of the people and world globalization is winging in under the radar.

The “kernels” above barely scratch the tip of the iceberg. It would take a ponderous tome, maybe several, to do justice to how depraved we have become just in *this* century. We see even ancient pagans were less deadly than 21st Century society because “the pagan Hippocratic Oath pledges: **I will neither give a deadly drug to anyone if asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect. Similarly I will not give a woman an abortive remedy.**” (emphasis mine).¹¹ Yet, our murderous, barbarism in the USA alone has generated a holocaust with a price tag of 60 million lives lost and counting. Can you say Planned Parenthood and Dr. Kevorkian? Can you say government mandated healthcare? These tares of secular relativism are seeping into every pore of our society; *including the church*. This is yet another pitched battle Satan is waging in his spiritual war.

Our entire way of life, our historic mores, our individual liberties and freedoms are being trampled underfoot; freedom *from* religion has been instituted; freedom *of* religion (for Christians) is evaporating in front of us. Why? “God is dead” and we have all but lost our Judeo-Christian heritage.

The United States is fast following in the footsteps of the humanistic European nations. Our government should no longer be symbolized by the eagle; rather an albatross hung around our necks. The eagle on the great seal grasps the banner in it’s beak that says, *E Pluribus Unum*;

meaning, “**Out of many, one.**” Today, with illegal aliens flooding across our borders, that credo is turned on its head: “**Many, out of one.**” Our elected officials seem only interested in preserving their own power, growing the bureaucracy, and erecting a one world government; with no evident concern for their sworn duty to the Constitution or their constituency.

FORM AND FREEDOM

“The atom was unsplit. So were most marriages. . . . ‘byte’ however you spelled it, had to do with food, not information. . . . ‘holocaust’ was only a word for a large fire.”¹² This statement is from *Time* magazine’s special issue; “The Most Amazing 60 Years.” Technology has swept over us more rapidly in the twentieth century than any other century. The following year Francis Schaeffer would write,

Something happened . . . which *cut the moral foundation out from under our culture*. Devastating . . . *every area of culture*, whether it be law or government, . . . in the schools, our local communities or in the family. And these have happened in the lifetime of many who are reading this book. Our culture has been squandered and lost, and largely thrown away. Indeed, to call it a moral breakdown puts it mildly. *Morality itself has been turned on its head* with every form of moral perversion being praised and glorified in the media and the world of entertainment. . . . How can we make sense of what has happened? . . . We will need, *Time* says, to discover the “idea characterizing [our] age” (emphasis mine).¹³

Schaeffer’s perspicacity of the moral breakdown of western society can hardly be matched. Few men have chronicled the tsunami that inundates us as effectively as Schaeffer. This affirms the cognitive dissonance embedded in western culture. The précis of Schaeffer’s conclusions on the *Time* article boils down to *form and freedom*. Our society seeks *absolute freedom*. But *form without freedom* results ultimately in lawlessness and anarchy. “Freedom, without a proper balance of form, will lead to chaos and to the total breakdown of society. Form, without a proper balance of freedom, will lead to authoritarianism, and to destructive individual and social freedom.”¹⁴

One can scarcely dispute with Schaeffer’s premise. Nevertheless, we are scarcely into the new millennia and it appears we are on a surreal path leading to *both* extremes. That is to say, society as a whole is increasingly chaotic and lawless on an individual basis; yet government is becoming more dictatorial seeking to raze the rights of the individual; and both segments are increasingly iconoclastic.

Charles Colson chimes in declaring, “The idea of defining one’s own life—of choosing to live on ones own terms—is rarely presented in . . . [a] negative light. In fact, postmodern society tells us that the ultimate goal of life is personal autonomy—to be free from all restraints, free to pursue our own happiness. . . . We alone are capable of making ourselves happy, . . . pleasure and personal gratification rule the day.”¹⁵

One of the premier Christian apologists of our day, Ravi Zacharias makes this poignant assertion:

We are living in a time when sensitivities are at the surface, often vented with cutting words. Philosophically, you can believe anything, so long as you do not claim that it is a 'better' way. Religiously, you can hold to anything so long as you do not bring Jesus Christ into it. . . . Religions are making a revival, but often as a hybrid of western marketing techniques and eastern mythology—a devastating combination of seduction through media and mysticism.¹⁶

Indeed, the hands of the “Clock Of The Ages” seem to be closing rapidly on twelve o’clock.
Maranatha!

SPIRITUAL WARFARE IN THE CHURCH

PHARISEES IN THE FOLD

One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. . . . Fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans.”¹⁷
Screwtape

Screwtape goes on to advise his demon nephew about his patient’s neighbors saying, “You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbours. Make his mind flit to and fro between the expression like ‘the body of Christ’ and the actual faces in the next pew. . . . Provided that any of those neighbors sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous.”¹⁸

However, Satan’s stratagem is multi-faceted and varied. In the church today Satan seems to be able to makes us think, *not that their religion is ridiculous*, but the *people themselves are ridiculous*, outlandish, not able to understand the Bible “like we do,” or any other reason you care to contemplate. His tactic here is to create division; using gossip, which begets strife. It should be remembered that Jesus’ concern was for people and relationships. Indeed Jesus told us, “love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples” (John 13:34-35).

We must take care for it is easy to become excessively goal oriented in our committees. Too focused on *getting the job done*, we forget our relationships with one another are vital. This catapults us into the sin of pride, Pharisaism, and self-righteousness. Satan is a master at implementing this stratagem and is very stealthily and effectively contaminating the church today. That is Satan’s goal—dissension in the local church and in many if not most churches, it would be undetected possibly until the church splits or dies. Satan loves a committee split, a church split, or anything else to destroy the worship, witness and work of the extant church of Christ.

That is a appropriate portrait of where the church really is in this milieu of the new millennium. Most “fixes” affect an erroneous diagnosis, thereby exacerbating the problem. The crux of the problem goes to discipleship, or rather the lack of it. People look at Matthew 28: 19, the so-called Great Commission and *see* “evangelism,” or they *see* “missions” and miss what they should be *seeing*; disciple-making. The imperative verb is *not* “go” or “baptize.” The

imperative verb **is *make disciples***. Not make a disciple-making program or class, but make discipling a lifestyle. Oh yes, and it *is* a command.

Indeed the church *is* being attacked from without. However take note; Satan's most effective strategy is to destroy the visible church from within. He employs these *tares* hidden amongst us that work to shred the structure of the Christian church from within and attack the authority, infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible. They are striving mightily to allow immoral behavior to be mainlined (i.e. ordaining homosexuals). Even some "conservative" Christian scholars are spouting heretical doctrine. This *is* very dangerous spiritual warfare and much of the church is unaware of it because of the epistemological, moral, and factual relativistic blinders over our eyes.

CHRIST'S IMMINENCE

THE LAST DAYS

“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son . . .” (Heb.1:1-2).¹⁹ This Scripture clearly affirms we *are* in the last days. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament* further affirms that, “The last days (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-3), . . . [is] a term which includes the entire period between the first century and Christ's return.”²⁰ Since Christ's incarnation we have been in the last days; the Scripture above clearly posits this reality.

If we are *not* in “the last days” any discussion of Christ's return is mute. However, both the Old Testament²¹ and the New Testament²² communicate that God's eternal plan includes a period known as the last days; this is seen in the major and minor prophets in the Old Testament and the Apostles' writings in the New Testament.

Exactly when Christ will take His Church out of the world (i.e. the Rapture) or *when* He will return again (i.e. His Second Coming) is not a premise to be specifically considered here—nor should it be. Christ made it clear in numerous places in the Gospels that we cannot know either the times or dates of the Christ's return for His Church or the Day of the Lord. In the Olivet Discourse Jesus told His disciples, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. . . . Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming” (Matt.24:36-42). This declaration must have been heavy with anxiety to Jesus' disciples. It is also an arduously apprehensive statement to the church today and rich in literary and eschatological tension.

Renald Showers posits,

Does it really matter when Christ will come to take His bride to be with Him? Should the timing of the Rapture make any practical difference in the life of a Christian, or is the issue so insignificant that Christians shouldn't bother with it? . . . When confronted with the issue of when the Rapture of the church will take place, many Christians respond, . . . so what? What difference does it make? . . . The imminent coming of Christ should have an incredible practical effect on the lives of individual Christians and the Church as a whole. The fact that the glorified, holy Son of God could step through the door of heaven at any moment is intended by God to be the most pressing, incessant motivation for holy living and aggressive ministry We can conclude that the issue of when the Rapture of the church will take place really does matter.²³

MESSIANIC MARKERS

In the verse above from Matthew 24 we are commanded to be alert and prayerfully vigilant and not be sleeping when our Lord does call us. Dwight Pentecost posits that, “The age from the rejection of the Messiah by Israel unto His reception by Israel at His second advent is outlined in two portions of the Word: Matthew thirteen and Revelations two and three; the former from the viewpoint of *God's kingdom program*, and *the latter from the view point of the church program*” (italics mine).²⁴

Showers expands on this with this assertion: “The concept of the *imminent* coming of Christ is a significant inference for the *Pretribulation Rapture* of the church. . . . The English word ‘imminent’ . . . from the Latin verb . . . means to ‘overhang’ or ‘project.’ . . . Thus, an imminent event is one that is always hanging overhead, . . .” (italics mine).²⁵ Furthermore it is the case that, “an additional indication that the church will not go through the Tribulation is that the Rapture is a *signless* and *imminent* event. . . . As imminent, it will be signless and as signless, it will have to be pretribulation, since once the Tribulation begins the end of the seven years could be predicted accurately” (italics mine).²⁶

Christ Himself declared there will be signs telling us when the time is approaching. His caveat is that the *exact times and dates* of these events cannot be known. It seems to be evident that if the signs leading to His Second Advent can be recognized, then these same signs are a precursor of His coming for His Church.

It makes sense then that the signs and events will not be *as emphatic* for the translation of the Church as for the Day of the Lord, but that is not to say they will be veiled, or imperceptible to the assiduous disciple. Indeed, the Rapture “launches” the end time activities in a Pretribulation argument.

There are also numerous Scripture passages that substantiates Jesus’ return; first for His church and second to judge the world and claim His Kingdom. There is not space to look at these exhaustively, but it will be useful to consider a handful, along with supporting views of known scholars.

John 14:3

“In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.”

Regarding the phrase “I will come again” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* establishes that, “[this phrase] . . . refers here not to the Resurrection or to a believer’s death, but to *the Rapture of the church* when Christ will return for His sheep . . . and they will be with Him” (italics mine).²⁷ Furthermore Showers affirms this. “A comparison of John 14: 2-3 with 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 reveals . . . both passages present a coming in which Christ Himself will

descend from heaven. . . . In conjunction with Christ's descent . . . believers 'shall be caught up together . . . in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air.'"²⁸

Acts 1:11

At Jesus' ascension two of His angels, spoke to His disciples and said, "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, *will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go* into heaven." "[This verse] describes the Lord's Ascension, but . . . [it] also anticipate His return. He will come back in **a cloud**, bodily, in view of people . . . The Ascension of Christ marked the conclusion of His ministry on earth . . . [it also] meant that the continuing work of Christ on earth was now placed in the hands of His disciples."²⁹ Nonetheless, the fact that promises of His return are given fourteen times in the New Testament doesn't seem to deter the mockers; then or now.

2 Peter 3:3, 4

"Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? . . ." The promise of His coming is in His Word for those who will seek it out. Those that confute Jesus assertions that He *will* return do so based "on the principle of uniformitarianism. . . . The view that the cosmic processes of the present and the future can be understood solely on the basis of how the cosmos has operated in the past."³⁰

It seem clear that those that have embraced naturalism, the mind-set of secular humanism, and the liberal theologian are either ignorant of what Jesus said in the Bible or chose to suppress its truth. Christ told us, "That no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2Pet.1:20-21). It is not revealed to us *the when* of Christ's return, for even He did not know (Matt. 24:36).

These mockers show an ignorance of, or a misunderstanding of the concept of the *imminence* of the Rapture. "In light of the meaning of the term 'imminent' and the fact that the next coming of Christ has not happened yet, we can conclude that the concept of the imminent coming of Christ is that His next coming is always hanging overhead, . . . Other things *may* happen before Christ's coming, but nothing else *must* happen before it can take place (emphasis mine)."³¹

2 Timothy 3:1-5

"But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, *holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power* (emphasis mine) . . ."

Duane Lotfin, President of Wheaton College writes that, “though these characteristics [listed in 2 Tim. 3: 1-5] are catalogued under the auspices of a prediction about the ‘last days,’ it is clear that Paul considered them to be already present in Ephesus.”³² So in these excerpts from his letter to Timothy, Paul is clearly addressing these problems with mockers to his audience.

Yet, could it not be supposed that mankind in the past 2000 years has had ample practice in all of these areas and has boosted them to a fine art form? Are not these characteristics and kinds of lifestyle rampant in the world today? Men *are* lovers of *self, money, arrogant, unholy*, etc. Look at the “heroes” of today; professional athletes for example, many who seem to care little about the sport in which they are engaged. They care only about the fame and fortune they can garner on and off the field.

Then there is the Hollywood horde that thinks of themselves not only “superstars,” but experts on anything and everything. They do whatever and whenever they want, often even to the detriment of their own well-being and that of their families. In their arrogance and hubris, neither of these groups takes any responsibility as life-affirming role models for their families, fans, or public; many who are just children.

1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17

These are parallel verses we just looked at in John 14. “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.” “The phrase “in Christ” refers exclusively to Church-Age saints. The [glorified] bodies of the dead in Christ will **rise** before the living Christians Old Testament saints will evidently be raised at the end of the Great Tribulation. (Dan. 12:2).”³³ These promises of the Lord coming to rapture his church and of His Glorious Second Coming are as sure as the multitude of His prophetic promises already fulfilled at His redemptive First Advent.

A quick note here about the word *rapture*. “The word *rapture* is not found in the Bible, but comes from the Latin word “*rapturo*.”³⁴ In the original Greek the word used is *harpazō*. Interestingly generally *harpazō* generally denotes “robbery of another’s property.”³⁵ However in the context here it means “to take to oneself.”³⁶ “In His promise, Jesus made it clear that *He*, not someone else, would come and receive His believers and that He would receive them unto Himself. This implies that coming to receive believers is so significant to Him personally that He will not entrust this activity to another.”³⁷

What a magnificent expectation! What a glorious image! The God that created *all* things, Messiah who defeated death and the grave and the coming of our Lord is imminent. He *will* return for His Church, just as He chronicled in His Word. Maranatha!

WHICH GENERATION?

Jesus' disciples asked Him pointedly, "What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age" (Matt.24: 3)? Jesus, as He often did, answered them with His parable of the fig tree declaring, "Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door" (vv. 32-33).

Observe that this is a process. A tree may put forth its tender branches with unfurled leaves weeks before they finally open. Thus to some extent these last days are a process as well. They will not happen in an instant. Christ's *actual return* will happen in an instant, but the signs of the milieu approximately mark this era. Granted, it could still be months or years or even decades. But as one can watch a leaf unfurl as winter fades, so too events in our world can be observed and one can realize that perhaps the last few grains in the hourglass are ready to drop—time itself is winding down. Consequently, it seems manifest that Christ's imminent return is nearer than ever before.

The disciples Jesus was speaking to were *not* to be the "generation" He was speaking of. No "the **generation** (*genea*) of people living in that *future day* will see the completion of all the events. Jesus was not referring to the generation listening to Him then, for He had already said the kingdom had been taken from that group"³⁸ ([Matt.] 21:43). Jesus was speaking specifically of His return in the verses (Matt.24:4-31) bracketed by the verses 3 and 32-33 quoted above.

Furthermore we learn that while "the primary application of this section is directed toward the future generation that will experience the days of the Tribulation . . . A secondary application of this passage . . . is to *believers living today* [italics mine] who comprise the body of Christ, the Church. The church is not in view in these verses. But just as God's people in a future time are told to be prepared, watchful, and faithful, so too believers today should also be faithful and alert."³⁹

It is essential not to reinterpret the Scriptures. In seminary the question was constantly asked and answered, "does a text have one interpretation or many? The *sensus unum* view insists there is only one . . . *one interpretation*, but that it may have *many implications/many applications*; . . ."⁴⁰

The generation extant, *our* generation, may well be *those people in a future time* referred to above. That means that the fulfillment of events in Jesus' Olivet Discourse has *never* occurred. Therefore, we have the magnificent hope of His return for His Bride given to us in God's infallible, inherent Word.

As believers we have an unmistakable advantage the world does not. We view life and world events through Biblical "Son glasses"; through the shaded lenses of the literal-historical-grammatical hermeneutic that dims the glare of the world that blinds people to the truth and real implication of world events.

Chafer, in Dwight Pentecost's wonderful work, *Things to Come*, says, "it is doubtless true that the fig tree represents in other Scriptures the nation Israel (cf. Matt. 21:18-20), but here is no occasion for this meaning to be sought in the present use of that symbol. When things of which Christ had just spoken, including even the beginnings of travail, begin to come to pass, it may be accepted as certain that He is nigh, even at the doors."⁴¹

Pentecost himself however thinks the best explanation of the phrase, "this generation" could mean "race, kindred, family, stock, [or] breed" and what "the Lord is here promising is that the nation of Israel shall be preserved until the consummation of her program at the second advent. . . ." ⁴² In either case it is clear that *neither* the "rapture" nor the Second Advent have taken place—unless one holds a preterist's view. Nevertheless it is apparent that Jesus' reference to "this generation" is *not* referencing the generation in which He was on earth, but a future generation.

We must *not* forget that the Bible tells us we cannot know the *times, date, or epochs*—only God the Father knows when the fullness of time is ripe, just as when Christ first came. That said, we certainly can watch, are commanded to watch, for signs (i.e. Israel is back in their land, the reemergence of Islam, the shifting focus of world events to the Middle East, etc.). We know from God's promises that time *is* running down. We can recognize by being cognizant of world events time is running out. Just as we can watch the branches and buds on the trees and know spring is approaching.

Since the Jews regained their land in 1948 diverse people have tried to "tell God" *when to come*. Those people range from Christians who should know better (i.e. Hal Lindsey), to numerous cults like Jehovah Witnesses, The People's Temple (Jim Jones), the Mormons, Heaven's Gate, Growing in Grace and others. All have tried to *set times* and *set dates* of the rapture and/or Christ's Second Coming. In some cases these assertions just cause a lot of confusion and embarrassment. In the worst cases many lives of men, women and even children were sent on their way to a tormented, Godless eternity (Rom.1:20,22). Maranatha!

THE CHURCH'S INAUGURATION

REDEMPTION

The Incarnate Christ came to redeem His creation. “The Bible is a book of redemption. It is that or nothing at all. . . . The whole of the Bible . . . looks to the mighty redemptive atonement of Christ;”⁴³ The New Testament particularly declares the actuality of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, *and* the founding of His Church. The Christian church is a singular New Testament event, built on the foundation of the twelve apostles (John 20:21) and birthed on the Jewish holiday of *Shavuot* (Feast of Weeks) or Pentecost (Greek = fiftieth). Shavuot or Pentecost kicked-off the season of Passover. Interestingly enough, “From Rabbinic times, the festival commemorates the giving of the law [the old covenant] to Moses at Mt. Sinai.”⁴⁴ The *new* Pentecost took place 50 days after Jesus resurrection; commemorating the beginning of the *new covenant*.

The meaning of the word church, *ekklēsia* in the Greek, means “an assembly” or “those called out.”⁴⁵ While the specific meaning depends on the context, in a general sense the church was and is to “assemble” for worship and edification (Heb.10:20-25). At the same time believers are called to be *separate* from the “life paradigm” of the world so we may reach back into the world for Christ (Eph.2:1; Rom.6:4). The Church today is also **called out from** the world, but not **called out of** the world.

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA

From Pentecost fast forward three decades to the Revelations Jesus Christ gave to His last living Apostle John. The seven churches in Asia had strayed from the teachings of Christ. He reminds them of the One they serve and Whom it is that brings these messages of approval and admonishment. “. . . from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us to be a kingdom, “a royal priesthood” (1Pet.2:9) to His God and Father--to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever” (Rev.1:5-6). John speaks not by his own authority, but it is by Christ’s authority alone (Matt.28:18).

In each case Christ reveals both the superior and the shameful in these seven churches. “It would seem evident, then, that John, in writing to the seven churches, is depicting this present age from the inception of the church to the judgment of the apostate church prior to the second advent.”⁴⁶

The *Bible Knowledge Commentary* states, “As the contents of the letters are analyzed, it is clear that they are, *first*, messages to these historic local churches in the first century. *Second*, they also constitute a message to similar churches today. *Third*, the individual exhortations to persons or groups make it clear the messages are intended for individuals today”⁴⁷ (italics mine).

“While each of these messages had a particular significance for these churches, they were also relevant for the church as a whole. . . . [This is] at a time when Roman hostility to Christianity was erupting into overt persecution.”⁴⁸ “The church as a whole” refers not just to the *early* church as a whole, rather the *whole* church as it progressively unfolds through the centuries until Christ finally removes it from the world. It also refers to believers that make up the church today.

Ephesus

Ephesus was “a major city of Asia Minor, a seaport, and the location of the great temple of Artemis. . . . [and was] commended . . . for their **hard work . . . perseverance**, their condemnation of **wicked men**, and their identification of **false** apostles. . . . [also] for enduring **hardships** and **not** growing **weary** in serving God.”⁴⁹ Christ also rebuked them saying, “. . . you have left your first love” (Rev.2:4). “This rebuke contrasts with what Paul wrote the Ephesians 35 years earlier, . . . now second-generation believers, . . . they had retained purity of doctrine and life and . . . service, [but] they were *lacking in deep devotion to Christ*. How the church today needs to heed this same warning . . . orthodoxy and service are not enough. Christ wants believers’ hearts as well as their hands and heads”⁵⁰ (italics mine).

Smyrna

Like Ephesus, Smyrna was “a large and wealthy [seaport] . . . Christ knew all about their sufferings: **I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!** . . . Though extremely poor, they were rich in the wonderful promises the church had given them. . . . They were being persecuted not only by pagan Gentiles but also by hostile Jews and Satan himself. . . . The local . . . synagogue was called the **synagogue of Satan**. In the history of the church the most severe persecution has come from religionists. . . . Christ had *no admonishment*, for this persecuted church: . . .”⁵¹ Smyrna was one of two churches to escape rebuke from our Lord.

Pergamum

“The third church was in **Pergamum** . . . like Ephesus and Smyrna . . . a wealthy city, but it was wicked. . . . The saints there were commended for being true, . . . to God under severe testing but they had . . . been guilty of severe compromise by holding **the teaching of Balaam** and **the teaching of the Nicolaitans**.”⁵²

Christ rebuked the church at Pergamum mightily telling them to repent or He would “. . . make war against them with the sword of My mouth” (Rev 2: 16). Those who repented were

promised “‘hidden manna . . . and a new name.’ . . . Christ as the bread from heaven, . . . and acceptance by God [respectively]”⁵³

Thyatira

This smaller church was full of “works, love, service, faith, . . . [and] patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first” (Rev.2:19). “. . . In contrast to the Ephesus church . . . the Thyatira Christians were doing **more** as time went on. But despite these evidences of Christian life and testimony, the church . . . had serious problems. . . . the **sexual immorality** that accompanied pagan religion was abhorred by Christ.”⁵⁴

Sardis

Sardis was an important city of commerce. The *Bible Knowledge Commentary* tells us, their “. . . only word of approval is in actuality a word of rebuke as Christ declared that they had **a reputation for being alive.**” Like the Pharisees, their outer appearance was a façade hiding their lack of life (cf. Matt.23:27-28). . . . They were told to **wake up** from their spiritual slumber . . . this church as a whole was dead or dying, but Christ recognized a godly remnant”⁵⁵

Philadelphia

This was the second of two churches, which Christ did not rebuke. “Christ stated, **I know your deeds. . . . I know you have little strength.** These words became the basis for their commendation that **you have kept My word and have not denied My name.**”⁵⁶

Laodicea

Laodicea was the antitheses of the church at Philadelphia. It received no acclamation only a rebuke, from our Lord. “They were pictured as utterly abhorrent to Christ because they were **lukewarm**. This was addressed to the church, and also to the . . . pastor In referring to the church as “lukewarm” Christ had in mind that this was a *permanent* situation . . . people in the ancient world customarily drank what was either hot or cold—never lukewarm”⁵⁷ (italics mine).

Seven Churches – Message for Today

The letters written almost 2000 years ago to the seven churches by John in Revelations are also written to us in the church today. Again *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* posits,

The letters to the seven churches are a remarkably complete treatment of problems that face the church today. The recurring dangers of losing their first love (2:4), of being afraid of suffering (2:10), doctrinal defection (2:14-15), moral departure (2:20), spiritual deadness (3:1-2), not holding fast (v 11), and lukewarmness (vv. 15-16) are just as prevalent today as they were in first century churches. Because these letters come from Christ personally, they take on significance as God's final word of exhortation to the church down through the centuries.⁵⁸

Arguably the problems that face the church today are greater and more deeply ingrained considering the two millennia we have had to “perfect” them. Laziness on the part of Christians and the lack of Biblical literacy in today’s church make it weak and anemic. Few believers are really “prepared to give an answer for the faith that lies within them (1 Peter 3:15).

Christ calls us to a deep, abiding relationship with Him; living in obedience. Christ called His apostles to *make disciples*, not just pass out tracts or track conversions. This same call He makes on our lives. Christ expects us to love others as He loved us (John 13:34-35). Christ requires us to *spend* our lives for Him (John 12:25).

This seems to be an era for false teaching—perhaps even more than in the past. The *DaVinci Code*, *The Jesus Seminar*, and *The Gospel of Judas* are just a few examples of the continuing onslaught by Satan’s minions to discredit and destroy the truths of Biblical inerrancy, infallibility and authority. Schaeffer declares, “. . . Scriptures are being destroyed by theological infiltration and compromise, and equally by cultural infiltration and compromise, . . . will [Christians] have the courage to draw the line, and do it publicly, between those that have been infiltrated theologically and culturally. . . . But if we truly believe in the infinite-personal God—the God of holiness and love—if we truly love the Lord and his Word and his church, we have no other choice.”⁵⁹

What Schaeffer is speaking of here is a low view of Scripture. This low view of Scripture helped breed the sexual immorality Christ articulated about the church in Thyatira that is applicable to our church today. Indeed the way we perceive the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible is fundamental to how we live today. How we view sin and whether we *live* for Christ or are as dead as the Pharisees; which Jesus called a “brood of vipers” and “white-washed tombs” (Matt.23:33-34) is critical.

Christ commended most of the churches for doing some things right, but most were rebuked. Only Smyrna and Philadelphia did not receive a rebuke. Laodicea was the singular church that God *did not* receive any commendation. These rebukes were some of the ways *those churches* were *not* engaged; but these same rebukes may be applied to the present day church. Space doesn’t permit an exhaustive documentation and evaluation of Christ’s churches in our milieu. Nonetheless, if the rebukes of Christ set out the deficiencies, then Christ commendations to the churches of Revelation are demonstrative of what we *should* be doing.

Let’s briefly review the commendations given to all of the churches, receiving them:

1. Hard work, perseverance, identification and condemnation of false apostles and the wicked, respectively.
2. Standing strong in the faith despite the extreme poverty and persecution.
3. Remaining faithful in the face of the presence of evil—“where Satan has his throne.”
4. Demonstrating a genuine love, faith, perseverance and their service and increasingly doing more deeds than at the first.
5. Live for Christ, be genuine—not Pharisaic.

These are the things the church of Christ should be focusing on at this precarious time in history.

EVANGELICAL CHALLENGE

Schaeffer reveals the crux of the problem for the church in the opening lines of *A Christian Manifesto*:

The basic problem of the Christians in this country in the last eighty years or so, in regard to society and in regard to government, is that they have *seen things in bits and pieces instead of totals*. They have gradually become disturbed over permissiveness, pornography, the public schools, . . . and finally abortion. But they have not seen this as a *totality*—each thing being a part, a symptom, of a much larger problem. . . . a world view based on the idea that the final reality is impersonal matter or energy shaped into its present form by impersonal chance. . . . It is not that these two world views [postmodern versus Evangelical] are different only in how they understand the nature of reality and existence. They also *produce different results*” (emphasis mine).⁶⁰

This lack of ability to see things in aggregate leads to compartmentalization of our lives. Work, family, and religion are pigeonholed in their own little cubbyholes. Social life is something separate as well, yet this all leads to a loss of perspective and ultimately to cultural relativism we see today. Attendant to the imminence and temporal signs we may be witnessing of Christ's coming; we should do all things with exigency. Time *is* shorter than it has ever been; where does that leave us; where are we really?

Once again Schaeffer goes incisively to the nucleus of the problem:

We are surrounded on every side with the loss of truth, with the possibility of manipulation that would have made Hitler chuckle . . . [and] the rulers of Assyria to laugh with glee. [We are] exactly where Romans 1:21, 22 says we are. Man has rebelled against God, and God is letting man go on to the natural conclusion, and man believes a lie. . . . This is not a day for a sleepy church—a church that is merely operating on the basis of memory . . . we need a Christianity that is strong. The games of yesterday are past. We are in a struggle that the church has never been in before. . . . It is not a day for small games. We need to teach a Christianity that is of content and doctrine. And we need to practice that truth . . . if people young and old are to take our claim of truth seriously.⁶¹

Is today's church engaged or merely waiting and watching from the cozy, confines of our stained-glass adorned edifices? This is the dilemma: because in our world there is *no* spiritually secure place! Nonetheless, we imagine that as long as our “fire insurance” is paid up we are safe. Christians are too busy, too timid, and too biblically illiterate to obey the clear commands of Scripture. The simply passage in John 20:21 tells us, “as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” Christ was *sent* to die for us. We are *sent* to live for Him. If needs must, to *die for Him*. We must repent; we *must* turn around.

In the movie *Bagger Vance*, Bagger, in talking about the game of golf tells Hardy, “It's a game that can't be won; only played.”⁶² So too with the church, *we* cannot win the game, but *must play*; we must be faithful and play the game. The victory is God's. The good news is; our game is *already won*! Two thousand years ago Christ hit a hole-in-one on a par six hole.

Christ's return *is* imminent. We are in spiritual warfare; all of God's creation has been in this battle since the fall of man. But the battle *is* God's and **the war won** before the foundations of the world. The extant church is not nearly as effective or engaged as it should be at this ominous time in history. We need to step up to the tee and “smash the living heck out it”⁶³ as Bagger would say.

The imitable C.S. Lewis provides a majestic conclusion finish,

Christ says, ‘Give me All. I don’t want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: **I want you**. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don’t want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. I don’t want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. **Hand over the whole natural self**, all the desires, which you think innocent, as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. **I will give you a new self** instead. In fact, **I will give you Myself**: my own will shall become yours’ (emphasis mine).⁶⁴

Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

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3. Welcoming Speech at White House Iftaar Dinner, [October 16, 2006]. White House website (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/10/20061016-6.html>).
4. Paul Sperry, *Infiltration* (Nashville: Nelson Current, 2005), 15-17.
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