

The Church and the Second Coming of Christ

“Is there any hope?” My Jehovah’s Witness friend painted a bleak picture of the world. As he reached into his briefcase he pulled out one brochure after another that told of war here and disease there. “The world has become an armed camp”, he observed. He had copies of news clippings about disasters on every continent: armed conflict; famine; AIDS in Africa; bird flu in Asia; rising rates of rape; homicide; ecstasy abuse; road rage; and environmental disaster, even in the Antarctic. His conclusions were pessimistic.

As a Christian, I was able to put a different spin on the events he described. “My hope”, I told him, “is in Jesus Christ, who is coming again. It is not in trying to get to heaven by good works or belonging to an elect group. Only those who trust in Jesus for their salvation have an assurance against an uncertain future.”

My hope: the return of Christ

Are we all heading towards some sort of catastrophe? Or is it all just a massive hoax? Do we need to be worried? What can we do about it anyway?

I grew up in a world that feared the spread of communism and the possibility of nuclear holocaust. At one stage, the USA allegedly had the capacity to destroy the Soviet empire fifteen times and the Soviets had the firepower to destroy the USA only twelve times. Military strategies were based on a theory called Mutually Assured Destruction, or MAD. That threat has receded somewhat, but it is still real. New threats keep emerging – the present one is radical Islam and Al Qaeda. Some political seers are predicting the development of an Islamic bomb, which will be used to further the threat of world Islamisation. That is never going to happen, but conditions on Planet Earth will go from bad to worse until only intervention by God will be enough to save us.

I have travelled a lot and thought a great deal about conditions in the world. I have seen (close-up) attempts by international organisations to bring about peace, security, a better globe and a fairer world. In the natural, the conclusions have been pretty grim. However, my hope is not in the United Nations or other world bodies, made up as they are of so many competing and vested interests. As a Christian, my only long-term hope (and one that stems from God’s Word) is the return of Christ. We believe it is inevitable. Christians should be the most positive people in the world.

The Bible tells us Jesus will come again

The Bible tells us that, just as Jesus left his disciples to return to heaven, so he will come again: physically, literally, visibly, in God’s time (Acts 1:6-11). It is foolish to predict dates or contexts for the Second Coming – that’s been done lots of times over the years and it hasn’t happened yet. How embarrassing! Jesus said that the timing is entirely up to God, not our speculation (Matthew

24:36, Acts 1:7). However, it *will* happen, and when it does we will all be involved.

In more than eight hundred places, the Scripture speaks of the Second Coming of Jesus. The New Birth is spoken of only nine times. Baptism is mentioned twenty times. Repentance is spoken of seventy times. But the Second Coming is the subject of one of every twenty-five verses in the New Testament alone. Jesus gave us a number of signs, pointers so that we would not be caught unawares. Noah escaped the flood because he was prepared (Hebrews 11:7). We should not be caught out either. There has been disagreement about what these signs mean, but when you see a sign you know it is pointing to something.

Some of the signs of the Second Coming, mentioned in the New Testament, have to do with the state of the church at the time. When the pointers become more pronounced that we need to pay close attention. What will be the state of the church when Jesus comes again? Let's look at what the Bible says.

False Christs

Jesus said that many would come in his name, as Christ (Matthew 24:3-5, 11, 23-25). I recently read that a major cult springs up in the United States alone on average at least once every month. At the same time, Christianity in the West appears to be hopelessly divided. Experts have added up established denominations and there are more than 25,000 identifiable denominations in the West alone. Just look at any phone book or the Internet. I met a man in India who told me he was Christ and that he had come to unify all the churches. He also claimed to be lots of other people. On another occasion I visited the Manhattan Headquarters of the Unification Church, the followers of the teachings of Korean-born Sun Myung Moon. There I met many young people who told me they were fed up with traditional religion and believed Moon has answers for the problems faced by the modern world. Moon claims he is the new Christ, sent to complete the work Jesus did not finish. He has several million followers.

One day a "super-Christ" (or an "anti-Christ") will emerge and many millions of disaffected people will follow him in a global church. Everything else is being globalised, why not faith? He will deny the Jesus of the Bible and offer a panacea for all the political, economic and social ills in the world. He will be a great leader. He will set himself up in place of God and demand peoples' worship (2 Timothy 2:1-4). We are going to see an increase in false Christs.

False Prophets

Many false prophets are at work in the world (1 John 4:1). A colleague who pursues Eastern religions talks about her "guru", a spiritual guide who advises her on important decisions. People are looking for answers, for something or someone to offer them genuine spiritual experiences and the way to God. The writings of Nostradamus are still popular and were quoted in length after the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York in September 2001. People are worried about the future and comforted by someone who claims to be able to

predict what is going to happen. But false prophets have always existed. What else are we going to see?

Godless religion

The Bible says that much of Christianity as the end of this age approaches will have a form of godliness, a name, a power base, but be without the power of God (2 Timothy 3:5). That is the story of a large percentage of churches in the West, where Christianity has become largely commercialised. The best preachers seem to be those who attract the highest TV ratings. World church organisations are more interested in ecological and gender issues than in proclaiming the message of the Bible. Contemporary religion is a mix between secular humanism and a brand of Christianity that gets embarrassed about the Bible. Look at the growing influence of the homosexual lobby in established denominations. Godless religion goes through the motions, but has nothing “real” to offer its followers. It therefore becomes irrelevant. I once read a Unitarian prayer that started out “To Whom it May Concern”. They weren’t even sure to whom they were praying. While it is important that the people of God have Biblical responses to the great social issues of our time, without the Gospel, without the risen Christ, without the power of God we are nothing.

I grew up in a period of “modernism”, where the supernatural elements of the Christian message were denied and quietly removed. We have witnessed a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit in recent years, but people who deny the virgin birth, the deity of Jesus, the miracles of the New Testament, the resurrection and the return of Christ continue to work their magic. Our response can’t afford to be an over-emphasis on Western values such as self-image, prosperity and the “me” culture. Nor can it consist of censoring the message so that it doesn’t offend others. The true message is bound to offend the sensibilities of non-Christians. Paul said the cross would be a stumbling block and an offence (1 Corinthians 1:23). People need hope and they will latch onto whoever offers it.

Recent high profile cases involving Australians accused of working for extremist Muslim organisations have identified Anglo-Saxon Australian men who rejected institutional Christianity when they grew up and adopted Islam as an alternative way of life. The church failed them and Islam offered the answers and purpose they were looking for, so they embraced Mohammed and the Koran.

If Christians do not have time read the Bible, pray and support fellow-Christians they will become irrelevant, ineffective and unattractive. The message that Jesus is coming again should be enough to get our attention and focus our lives on what is really important.

Occult growth

Another change the New Testament discusses in relation to the Second Coming is growth in alternative religions (1 Timothy 4:1). Time Magazine recently ran an article about the religious nature of man. It concluded that religion is alive and well because people are looking for God. There is almost a “God gene” in every

one of us. Religion is still on the agenda, but the format is different. People are prepared to believe anything, but they are not necessarily prepared to come to church. The so-called “New Age Movement” (which is still in vogue) is simply a collection of variants on paganism. Some environmentalists are pagans in disguise. Take David Suzuki, who claims: “All is interconnected”. The Bible does not teach we are part of God; it says we are accountable to God; some people don’t like that responsibility and opt for false religion in the name of personal freedom.

Established religion is confused, while occult groups thrive. In case you thought they were no longer prevalent, they are everywhere. I was beginning to think the word occult was passé, however in a recent official interview I was asked if I belonged to any occult groups, including witchcraft and Satanism. My questioners told me people frequently answer those questions in the affirmative.

Persecution

Another element is growing persecution of Christians (Matthew 24:9, 10). Who wants to be a Christian “witness”? The New Testament term for witness is the one that gave us the English word “martyr”. Now who wants to be a witness? The past century has seen more people give their lives for Christ than at any time in human history. Believers in Christ in most parts of the world have had to choose between faith and relationship with God, on the one hand, and communism, Maoism, Islam, radical Hinduism, militant Buddhism and a host of other belief or anti-belief opponents on the other. They have lost houses and land, jobs and financial security, children and marriages, finally even life itself – by the millions.

The largest church on the globe is in China, where some estimates suggest there are more than seventy million people who identify with the Christian faith. China is also the leading nation where men, women and children perish in the name of Christ. Jesus said there would be massive persecution. He also said the love of many would grow cold. Peter’s promise to die with Jesus melted away when he got too close to the cross. That’s perfectly understandable to those of us who value material possessions, wealth, comfort, our homes, job security and family above all else. But Jesus called his disciples to leave all and follow him; most of them died as a direct consequence of doing so. No religion, no faith system in history has paid the high price that Christians have. Jesus said it would get worse before the end of time. Persecution, betrayal, mistrust, abuse would come from within.

Falling Away

Jesus also said there would be a great falling away (Matthew 24:11, cf 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 4:3, 4). It is not easy to be a Christian in a majority of countries. Church surveys in Australia reveal a continuing, massive decline in church attendance and belief. It only takes one generation for a nation to go from strong Christian influence to almost total secularism. There are few prophetic voices genuinely speaking for God; little apostolic influence moving in power and

authority to bring about His purpose in the church; few Christian leaders declaring God's message; only a minority really care. Only a few Christians support evangelical Christian candidates in elections. It is easy to talk about faith, we must put it into practice or it will empty and meaningless to those around us.

Australia's largest newspaper, The Sydney Morning Herald, recently reported that those who explore their faith and put it to the test are likely to be amongst the best adjusted people in society. The unbelief and false teaching of some should provide a warning to us, but a warning that points the way to the return of Christ, not to a bunker where we hide from the verbal barrage of an unbelieving society. We have to choose. Let's hold firm. The Bible says that those who hang on will be saved.

The Gospel will be preached throughout the world

It seems that all we have talked about so far is bad news. In fact, the fact and timing of the return of Christ are good news. God is still in control. That is the bottom line. Man is not in control. Satan is not in control. Jesus predicted that the Gospel would be preached throughout the world before his return (Matthew 24:14). There are more missionaries than ever before in human history. Five hundred years ago the Bible was available in only fourteen languages. Two hundred years ago this number stood at seventy-five. Today the number is around four thousand. The Internet is able to penetrate the most "closed" societies. This is the first generation in history in which it is possible for all nine thousand ethnic groups to be reached with the Gospel.

A great spiritual outpouring

The Old Testament prophet Joel predicted that, in the last days, the Holy Spirit would be poured out on all flesh (Joel 2:28). I don't know all that means, but in spite of persecution and falling away in some parts of the world, there has been a mighty outpouring of God's Spirit in others. I have been privileged to see the results in different parts of the world. I once told a Muslim sheikh who boasted about the spread of Islam that millions of people are coming to Christ in the greatest move of God in history. Across the massive continents of Africa and South America millions are turning to Christ. Some traditionally Catholic countries in South America have become missionary-sending nations. The massive turning to Christ recorded on the Day of Pentecost (see Acts 2) is being repeated in greater dimension in many parts of the world. God is moving, and no one can stop him. The astonishing thing is how little press this great outpouring receives in the West. I think it is because we are so parochial we don't have time to look over the horizon and see what fantastic things God is doing elsewhere.

How should we live?

If we believe in the return of Christ, how should we live? For a start we should start living as though He will return (Hebrew 9:28). We should put Christ first in our decision-making and live faithfully for him, instead of being dragged down

with the rest of society. We should be ready and make every day count, as though today could be "it". Like the Italian gardener who told a journalist that he kept the estate ready for the owner to return. The proprietor hadn't visited for a number of years, but "could come at any time", so the gardener worked hard to keep the trees and flowers in peak condition (Matthew 24:44). Let's live as though Jesus could come at any time. Let's be faithful to Him and remain alert, so that we will be able to rejoice at his coming. I don't know when that will be. As believers you and I should be looking for Him and working hard to fulfil his purpose in our lives (Titus 2:13; Hebrews 10:36, 37).

To the Christian believer the return of Christ will be the greatest moment in history. What a hope! What an expectation!