

THE APOSTASY AS IT RELATES TO THE LORD'S RETURN

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The concept of apostasy is almost Bible-wide, but our concern here is for that apostasy which will occur just before the Lord's return. Paul spoke of it in both specific and general terms. Our focus will be on its specific use in 2 Thessalonians 2 and its general use in 2 Timothy 3.

The specific reference in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 speaks of "the apostasia" as a precursor to the day of the Lord. How the rapture of the Church relates to the day of the Lord then is Paul's theme in this passage and will be ours in the first part of this discussion. Since the time of the rapture is a debated issue with five basic views being proposed (pre-trib.; partial rapture; mid-trib.; pre-wrath; and post-trib.), it will help to briefly recite the grounds for holding the pre-trib. position as related to the problem of apostasy.

The Pre-tribulational View of the Rapture

As previously stated, the pre-tribulation view maintains that Christ will come to catch away the Church just before the seventieth week of Israel begins. That (I believe) will also begin the day of the Lord and the tribulation period. The "day of the Lord" is that future period in which God will deal with the world in judgment, following which His reign of peace on earth will take place. Related to Israel, it is primarily that prophesied period of the "seventieth week" which Jesus declared would take place just before His return in glory, followed by the blessing period of the Millennial reign. How then does the Church fit into this picture? This question was adroitly answered by both Jesus and Paul, from which the pre-tribulation rapture position is established.

1. Jesus Describes His Coming In Two Different Ways (Matt 24, Jn 14)

The Lord gave two prophetic addresses to the twelve disciples before His departure, preparing them for His coming absence. One was the Olivet Discourse on Wednesday; the other, the Upper Room Discourse on Thursday. Though both speak of His coming again, they appear to speak of two entirely different events. The first discourse was given in answer to the disciples' question as to when He would return to fulfill His program with Israel (Matt. 23:39; Ps. 118:26), and what sign would announce His coming. In reply Jesus simply elaborated on Daniel's prophecy, declaring that the "abomination of desolation" will signal the beginning of the "great tribulation," a period of intense distress for Israel. That sign will alert the nation to the time of His coming three and one-half years later. Following this final purge of Israel, Christ will return to judge the wicked and deliver the faithful. Far from giving up His covenant program for Israel, He assured them that He would come again with salvation and healing to regather the remnant for Millennial blessings (Matt. 24:31; Is. 27:13).

The Upper Room Discourse, however, was entirely different, being a reply to Peter's question as to when they would follow Him to where He was going. His answer here sharply contrasts with the Olivet Discourse. Rather than portraying the extreme tribulations that will precede His coming to Israel, Jesus announced the coming of the Holy Spirit to teach and

prepare them for service until He returns. At that time He will take them to the Father's house (John 14:1-3).

Whereas the Olivet Discourse described His final coming to Israel to prepare the remnant for the Messianic kingdom, the Upper Room Discourse announced His coming to receive them to the Father's house. Two different groups are addressed, though He spoke to the same disciples. They first represented the faithful of Israel, a remnant of which would be on earth when He returned to set up His kingdom. But they also represented the new body of the Church who would be taught and empowered by the Holy Spirit till He comes to take them to the Father's house.

Many attempts have been made to harmonize these two comings of Christ as one, but they are fraught with insurmountable difficulties. Any vague similarities drawn are rather incidental. The main reason many try to meld them into one is that they were addressed to the same group of disciples (except Judas). Too often it is forgotten that the disciples were at that time the faithful remnant of Israel. No one else could have represented that group to whom Christ will return to fulfill His covenant program. For this reason Jesus obviously had to speak to them as representing both groups, here addressing the Church on the eve of His going to the Cross.

These two addresses strongly suggests that His coming will be in two stages, first to receive the Church out of the world, and later to purge and refine the remnant of Israel in the world.

2 The Church accompanies Christ as He returns in glory (Rev. 19)

A second support for the pre-tribulation position comes from Jesus' later words in Revelation. When Christ returns after the great tribulation, He will be accompanied by an army from heaven. These are identified by their "fine linen" as the wife of the Lamb (19:7-8, 14). They are associated with Him as He comes to judge, make war, and reign over the earth (I Cor. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 20:4-6).

Prior to this return, however, there are two events which will have already taken place in heaven. One is the marriage of Christ to His bride, here seen as already past (1st of a cluster of 3 aorists), evidently solemnized at God's throne. The marriage feast that follows (deipnon tou gamou) is distinguished from the marriage itself (gamos, vv. 7, 9), and is described by Jesus in Matthew 25:1-13 as taking place on earth. Thus His bride will accompany Him after the marriage to the marriage feast on earth as a part of His glory. A second event already past when He returns is the giving of rewards to the Church (Rev. 19:8). The bride's wedding garments are called "fine linen," embroidered with her righteous deeds. This symbol is the Lord's way of emphasizing how each believer contributes to Christ's glory for that grand occasion by their faithful service on earth. It follows the custom of each bride preparing her wedding dress; but it also suggests an eternal garment, rather than just a wedding or "going-away outfit."

The implication is almost incontrovertible that the Church will have been with the Lord for some time prior to His return to earth. Though these two events could conceivably take less

than seven years, there is no reason such momentous ceremonies and celebrations at the Father's throne should not involve some quality time. Surely the marriage of all marriages will not be a split-second affair, such as a simultaneous rapture and return to earth would require. At that marriage all the incomprehensible splendors the Father can lavish on His Son will doubtless be showered on this heavenly Groom and His bride. It is logical to see this as taking some time, and the Bible gives every evidence that it will.

3 The need for a time gap to salvage a millennial people

Besides the need for an interval in heaven between the rapture and Christ's return, a similar need is apparent here on earth. Since the Millennium or Messianic age directly follows His return, a redeemed remnant in mortal bodies will necessarily be on earth to begin that grand society fulfilling the messianic promises (Isa. 11; 35; 65:19-25). Included will be the righteous remnant of Israel, as well as many Gentiles (Matt. 25:32f). Through this salvaged remnant the Lord will fulfill His covenant promises and bless the world with unprecedented glory (Rom. 11:15ff.).

If, however, the rapture takes place at Christ's return and the judgment of "sheep and goat" nations immediately follows (Matt. 25:32), where would such a redeemed group apart from the resurrected Church come from? The "sheep" would be raptured and the "goats" would go away to eternal punishment (Matt. 25:34, 46), thus leaving no earthly nucleus for that millennial kingdom. Without such an earthly people the purposes of the Messianic age as prophesied could not be fulfilled.

Recognizing a pre-trib. rapture, however, resolves that problem. With this view a seven-year period will transpire in which a large group of people from every nation are saved (Rev. 7:9-14). Many will be martyred, but many others will survive those trials to be assigned by Christ a place in His earthly kingdom. The fact that these will have missed the rapture of the Church does not suggest a "second chance" for procrastinators. Paul declared that those who have heard and neglected the gospel prior to the rapture will only be ensnared in a continued delusion (2 Thess. 2:11). Others, however, who have not had that opportunity will respond and be saved during that reign of terror to enter the kingdom of Christ's Millennial reign.

Again, it might be asked why this should take seven years. Could not this remnant be saved instantly at the second coming, as seems the case with those Israelites in Zechariah 12:10ff.? These appear to make their first response as they see the nail wounds of Messiah.

With a sovereign God, of course, anything is possible, but not when He has declared it otherwise. The contexts of Matthew 25 and Revelation 6-18 show that such an instantaneous mass conversion is hardly the case, even for this Jewish remnant. The "wise virgins" of Matthew 25:10 and the "sheep" of Matthew 25:34 who enter the millennial kingdom are those who have made adequate preparation prior to that time. They are not saved at that time, but acclaimed as genuine believers as the lost are sent away. To assume that many will have rejected the gospel even through the tribulation and then are saved as they see Christ returning, is highly unlikely. Though many will be saved during that tribulation period who have not had a previous

opportunity, it will be through a proper reception of the gospel as demonstrated by their readiness to align with Christ's cause in a world of wickedness.

The need for this time gap then makes it almost inevitable that the rapture will take place some time before Christ's coming to the earth. This provides a time span in which God will deal with the world in judgment, sifting it and calling out "brands from the burning" before the fiery judgments takes place.

4 The absence of the Church in Revelation 4-18

John's message in Revelation has a dramatic movement, first addressing the needs of the churches in Asia Minor and then portraying God's program of consummation. Though the Church is the focus of the Lord's exhortations in chapters 1-3, it is not even mentioned in chapters 4-18, which describe the tribulation. As if to emphasize the contrast, the Lord introduced the cataclysmic events of the day of the Lord by first disciplining the Church for effective service. Judgment must begin at the house of God (I Pet. 4:17). In so doing, He reminded them of seven spiritual characteristics of a growing and productive church that need nurturing in all churches.

Following these reminders to the churches, the Lord described events of the day of the Lord as the "things that shall be after these things" (Rev. 1:19; 4:1). Though He spoke of the churches nineteen times in the first three chapters, no mention is made of them in the tribulation chapters until Christ's return with His Bride in chapter 19. But besides no mention of the Church (ecclesia) in these chapters, there is also an absence of many church words or concepts. J. B. Smith, in his Revelation of Jesus Christ has noted fifteen such words that are missing in this section: Father, Holy Spirit, grace, mercy, truth, faith, hope, love, peace, believe, repent (except in the negative), pray (except to the hills), comfort, and good. Though an argument from silence, these omissions are almost thunderous in making their point.

5 The new prominence of Israel in Revelation 6-18

In contrast to the Church's absence, Israel is highlighted in these tribulation chapters. The sealed servants of chapter 7 are 144,000 Israelis, specifically named. The satanic attacks on saints are not against the "Church," but against Israel (Rev. 12:12-17; 13:4; 14:12; 17:6; 18:4). The obvious implication is that the Church has already departed the earthly scene before this judgment, and God is again at work with Israel, completing the predicted activities of the seventieth week as outlined by Daniel.

6 The Church to escape God's wrath in day of the Lord (I T h. 5:9-10)

The apostle Paul also discussed the day of the Lord, giving the Church some comforting counsel concerning its coming wrath. Though the world will not escape that day of wrath, the true Church will (5:3, 9-10). It is important to notice that the wrath alluded to is not eternal wrath in hell, but the wrath to which the world will be subjected in the day of the Lord (5:2). To emphasize that point, he noted that, whether living or dead at the time of that coming wrath, all believers will be "with the Lord" (5:10). His stress on "with" here (3 successive words

emphasizing "with," hama sun autw) is most unique, duplicated only in his rapture statement of I Thess. 4:17. Both were given to "comfort and edify" the Church. He could hardly have been more emphatic in stressing the Church's presence with the Lord and absence from the world during the day of the Lord.

7 Three events must precede the day of the Lord (2 Thess 2:1-8)

Several months later Paul wrote a second letter to the Thessalonians to further clarify the coming day of the Lord. Many had recently suffered great persecution, provoking a rumor that that day had already come (2 Thess. 1:4). As new believers, they needed further instruction about persecution (1:5-9). Had he previously taught them that the Church would go through that period of wrath, the question would not have been raised. Paul first consoled them that their afflictors would be duly punished in God's time. He then assured them that the day of the Lord had not come.

1 "The apostasy must precede the day of the Lord (2 Thess 2:3)

Apostasy is usually seen as a great latter-day defection from the faith. To stress that view, this verse is often associated with other similar passages, notably I Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 3:1ff. and I John 2:18ff. From these, the doctrine of a massive, latter-day retraction from the faith has been constructed, and the word "apostasy" has come to be defined in dictionaries as "desertion of one's faith."

The major problem with that view is that none of these passages speak of a unique, end-time spiritual defection just before the day of the Lord. They all speak of general defections of various kinds, some already in progress in the historical setting. It is therefore necessary to certify whether such a singular, climactic defection, immediately preceding the end-time (one that all alert believers should recognize), can be supported from this major passage on the subject.

Grammatically speaking, the word "apostasy" means "departure" (from the verb *aphistemi*). Since the word is never used elsewhere in the New Testament without a qualifier (e.g., "departure from Moses," Acts 21:12; cf. "to depart from the faith," I Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:12), by itself it means simply "departure." It can refer to either a religious (or political) defection or to a physical departure (the rapture). Preceded by the article, it designates a specific departure of which Paul had previously instructed them.

Historically, the word was translated simply "departure" in the early English translations (Tyndale, Coverdale, Geneva, etc.). Further studies in the LXX and classical Greek, however, have shown a preponderance of its usage as religious or military rebellion (Josh. 22:22; I Chr. 29:19; Jer. 2:19; I Mac. 2:15). These references have been used to give the term itself strong overtones of gross evil, resulting in translations such as "rebellion" or "great rebellion." Most commentaries, in fact, see it as a complete abandonment of the faith.

As noted, the term itself, stripped of those accretions, means simply "departure," allowing the context always to determine its object or ablative. This view has been duly expounded and

only needs restatement here. As the term is accompanied by a qualifier in all the other New Testament usages (either directly or indirectly), that appears to be true also of many of its LXX and extra biblical usages. Rarely does the term apostasia by itself carry such dark overtones (I Mac. 2:15 is a loaded context). In the New Testament the verb form is used fifteen times, only three of which speak of religious defection. Paul, in fact, used it in 2 Tim. 2:19 as to "depart from wickedness" (aor. imp.). Unencumbered with qualifiers, the native meaning of the term is simply "departure." The kind of departure described depends on the context in which it is used..

In the context of 2 mess. 2:3, the article is used to specify a known departure of which he had previously spoken. The apostle almost scolds them for not knowing it, suggesting that some deception might have already set in. To discern the nature of that departure, a simple check of the context should be made. As even Hendricksen says, Paul saw the point as "desperately important that they got it straight."

If we first look for a prior mention by Paul of a great spiritual defection to come ("falling away"), we look in vain (I Tim. 4:1 was written c. 10 yrs. later). Some have thought to find it in the rebellion of the "man of lawlessness" referred to by Daniel, making Antichrist's breaking the covenant with Israel a "falling away" from the faith (Robert Gundry, The Church and the Tribulation p. 118). That view, however, almost redefines the term and makes "the apostasia" and the revelation of Antichrist one and the same. This Paul sharply denied, maintaining that "the departure" must come "first," after which the lawless rule of Antichrist will take place (two verbs dividing them, 2 'Mess. 2:3). The "apostasia" must precede the revelation of Antichrist. Others see it as a type fulfillment of "the apostasy" forced on many Jews at the time of the abomination of Antiochus Epiphanes in 167-164 BC (I Mac. 2:15; Marvin Rosenthal, The Pre-wrath Rapture pp. 197ff.). That would make "the apostasy" a part of the 70th week of Israel and suggest Paul is resorting to non-canonical literature here to exhort the Church. Otherwise, Paul had not so much as mentioned a spiritual defection to remind them of.

If, on the other hand, we look for a physical departure of which he had spoken, we need only go to the preceding verses. There he identified the rapture ("our gathering together to Him") and its relation to the Lord's coming as the subject of his discussion (2:1). Those verses also refer back to his extended discussion on the rapture in I Thess. 4:13-18. Having detailed the rapture in the first epistle, he could refer to it here as "the departure." No other departure had even been alluded to in the previous historical context.

Conclusion The two viable options then must be weighed as to their plausibility as an indication that the day of the Lord has come. Making "apostasia" to be a religious or spiritual defection is admittedly attractive in light of various extra-biblical sources. It also seems to accord well with the fact that Paul often used the LXX, (as evident from other passages, e.g., Rom. 13:9; Ex. 20:13-14). Those outside references, however, rarely use either verb or noun form without some qualification in context, as true also in the New Testament. That pejorative use is seen to be balanced by the fact that the verb form (in NT) usually describes other kinds of departure and is only rarely used to describe "rebellion."

If, however, the term does indeed speak of a great rebellion to occur just prior to Antichrist's appearance, no one appears to know what it is. Interpreters have propounded nearly

every brand of evil that arises to be that final apostasy. Though the commentaries are nearly universal in identifying it as a great rebellion, they are also quite united in their uncertainty as to what it is.

If, however, it is identified in light of the grammar and context of the passage as the departure of the Church in rapture, many problems in the context find resolution. It specifically answers the question of how "our gathering together" relates to the day of the Lord and the parousia (v. 1). The answer is obvious. It also relates to Paul's declaration in I Thess. 5 that the day of the Lord will come without warning and that the whole Church will be "together with-with" the Lord at the time of that wrath (5:2, 9). Its departure will precede that day.

A further problem this view reveals is the question of why Paul didn't remind them of the rapture preceding the day of the Lord, if indeed he believed that would be the case. The evidence is that he did so -- with strong emphasis. Finally, it shows Paul's great concern that there be no confusion on this crucial issue when the terms are interpreted in their immediate context (v. 3). The pity is that few terms have suffered so in translation as this one, thus mitigating its significance in relating the rapture to the day of the Lord and its tribulations.

For these reasons, it appears that the departure of the Church in rapture is the better of the two options from the standpoint of both the grammar and context. The apostle declared this "departure" to be the initiating event that will introduce the coming day of the Lord.

2 The Restrainer withdraws Himself (2 Thess 2:6-7)

A second event that must precede this day is the withdrawal of the "restrainer." The identity of this one has long been pondered, but the fact that He restrains the work of Satan points to the bridling work of the Holy Spirit. Who but God could restrain Satan (v. 9)? It should be noted also that He is not necessarily "removed," as if by a higher power, but "removes Himself" (middle voice, aor. subj.). He is not "taken out" of the way. The evident purpose of His withdrawal at this time is to allow sin to expend itself in an accelerated way, forcing a quick separation of the chaff and wheat in the crucible of tribulation. That He withdraws in association with the Church which He indwells, is the obvious implication in the context.

This withdrawal of the Holy Spirit should be further clarified. He withdraws only as a restrainer of wickedness, certainly not as the sovereign Convicter and Regenerator of sinners (cf. Gen. 3:6). His omnipresence is not in question. He will continue His salvaging operation throughout the tribulation period, for no one could ever be saved apart from His work. His withdrawal as the Restrainer, however, will open the way for the rule of Antichrist to bring wickedness to a head for divine judgment.

3 The "man of lawlessness will be revealed (2 Thess 2:3-8)

The third prominent event preceding the day of the Lord will be the manifestation of the "man of lawlessness." This individual is better known as the Antichrist, of whom much will be said in a later chapter. His long-prophesied rise on the world scene will inaugurate the events of the end-time period. The time of his manifestation could be either when he first enacts his seven-

year treaty with Israel or when he breaks it at the mid-point. The fact that he enacts this peace treaty with Israel and quickly rises to power, as noted in Revelation 6, suggests that Paul here refers to the time of Antichrist's deceptive covenant with Israel.

Summary and Conclusion These various considerations from both Scripture and logic strongly favor the view that the rapture will precede the tribulation. They indicate that the next event on God's prophetic calendar is the coming of Christ to receive His Church in the air. We are to "wait for His Son from heaven," not for the appearance of Antichrist to sign a pact with Israel. Though other views also appeal to Scripture, we believe this view best harmonizes all the relevant passages in their various contexts.

General Apostasy In The Last Days" of the Church

Having questioned the concept of a specific "rebellion/apostasy" just prior to the onset of the day of the Lord, it remains to strongly stress the predictions of general apostasy in the last days. The Bible has much to say of these general characteristics of the final days of the Church on earth. That being so, it is necessary to relate such a study to the current fad of searching for "signs of the times. Interpreting Signs

Does the Bible promise signs that will portend the end of the Church age? We note from Bible history that the Lord often designated signs to alert His people for the fulfillment of prophetic events. This He did with Noah and the great flood; with Abraham concerning Israel's entering and leaving Egypt; with Isaiah and the captivity of Jerusalem; with Jeremiah and Israel's return from Babylon; and with Daniel's description of Messiah's coming. Concerning His second coming, Christ Himself enumerated several special events that will presage His return to earth. These various instances remind us that the Lord likes to nudge His people as He prepares to fulfill His prophetic program.

The place of signs today. This being so, we are prone to scan the horizon for signals of that next prophetic event, the coming of Christ for the Church. Christian "astrology" has frankly blossomed into something of an art form in our time. Catering to this appetite for the sensational, a rash of prophetic seers has surfaced in the past half-century to almost pinpoint the day of the rapture, if not the hour. The question arises as to whether this preoccupation with signs is valid or even why 'some in prophetic studies.

We should be reminded that such extrapolations are really without biblical warrant and fly in the face of many cautions against them. Though Jesus pre-announced many signs to presage His return to the earth, He gave none that would announce His coming to receive the Church in the air. That coming is imminent (it can occur at any time) and always has been since Revelation 22:20 ("Behold, I come quickly"). No prophecies or signs need fulfillment before this grand ascent of the Church to heaven. In this sense we live in a sign-less age -- another period of prophetic silence. The Church today is simply told to "wait for His Son from heaven" (I Thess. 1:10).

This lack of signs to herald the rapture, however, should not be pressed into wrong service. It should not be used to excuse lethargy or negligence in relating current events to Bible

prophecy. Jesus stressed the need for all believers to be alert to prophetic seasons (Mark 13:29). The writer of Hebrews also emphasized this point, saying that an alert Church will be able to "see the day drawing near" (Heb. 10:25). How will that be possible? Not by star-gazing for signs, but by studying God's end-time program and being alert to earth's preparation for His coming. As a farmer discerns the approach of summer by the leafing of fig trees, Jesus said, so believers should be alert to the buildup of world events as they swirl into place to fulfill God's program.

With these reminders and cautions, let's look at our world today as it relates to conditions of the "last days" both from the view of the seers and that of our society today.

A Look At Our Moral World

We are often reminded of how far we have progressed as a liberated and knowledgeable society. Though blotches of corruption may appear here and there, our age prides itself in its scientific and social advances, unparalleled in history. Even moral deviations are seen as "upward mobility" in achieving a more liberated lifestyle. Traditional values are more and more viewed with scorn by both media and comedians. They see those principles as outmoded shackles from an unenlightened past. Viewed through these rose-colored glasses, the fast-changing morals and mores of our time are hailed as wholesome, progressive, and enchanting.

The realistic picture. Take off those tinted glasses, however, and the chagrin of naked reality appears. The biblical seers looked beneath this enchanting facade and saw the truth. Their frightening disclosure was that "the king has no clothes." And worst of all, he doesn't know it.

As Amos the prophet decreed Israel's fall by holding God's plumbline to their moral house (Amos 7:7-9), so the judgment of our society can be measured and anticipated by its adherence to God's moral standards. In contrast to humanistic views, our moral world is not destined to evolve into sublimity, but will grossly deteriorate toward the end of the age. Paul declared that "in the last days, perilous times will come." He then gave a most pessimistic view of world conditions just prior to the Lord's return. In it he listed twenty features of personal, social, and religious relapse that will develop (2 Tim. 3:1-13).

His moral pronouncement was that men will become great "lovers" -- lovers of self, money, and pleasure. This romance with the ego will show itself in arrogant pride and independence, disrespect for parents and authority, and an addiction to pleasure and immorality. The result will be a bondage to the lower passions in sharp contrast to their lack of love for God and His Word.

The fractured family. How does our generation fit this dour denouement? Frankly, you might think Paul tore a page from our daily news. Anarchy and terrorism are on the rise around the globe, often in the name of religion. Family anguish arising from fatherless homes is a desperate plague of our times, spawning endless heartaches and civil disorders. This disjoining of fathers from their children is one of the problems that Elijah the prophet was to grapple with in the end time (Mal. 4:6). It's already here -- with a vengeance.

Such truncated homes easily domino into further social and moral unrest. Lack of fatherly guidance often breeds disrespect for authority, which in turn begets gangs and violence. Fast on the heels of these come teen-age pregnancies, rampant abortions, homosexual and Lesbian lifestyles, and disrespect for life in general. Many of our school grounds today are plagued with violence where even children smuggle in guns for protection. Corrective measures often seem to only harden delinquent resolve. Though the dreaded disease of AIDS threatens to destroy society, it has had little affect in throttling immorality, being shrugged off as mere inattention to hygiene. Live-in lifestyles are becoming more and more common, while faithfulness to marriage vows is a tired joke of TV sitcoms. A recent term on the grand jury underscored for me again that the root of much crime today stems from the shrapnel of fractured families.

The sexual revolution This deviation from biblical norms is epitomized today in our changing attitudes toward sex. Having legalized free sex, our society now has the temerity to legalize pre-born infanticide, calling it "abortion" to euphemize its brutality. With the doors of free heterosexual expression open, the homosexuals and Lesbians are suing for their "right to choose" their lifestyle as well. Any who question that are charged with discrimination and hate-mongering. And for all these risky sexual deviations, protection and health support are being demanded out of the public till. Increasingly, anti-biblical "lifestyles" are being dignified in the name of an open and pluralistic society.

How do we respond to this modern blitz on morals? The intimidation and challenge it represents require strong assertion of biblical principles. Life is a gift of God that starts at conception (Ps. 139:13-16; Luke 1:41-42). Marriage is a God-given institution in which state alone is allowed the expression of sexual passions (Matt. 19:18). As to homosexuality and lesbianism, the Lord many times condemned its practice as contrary to His creative purpose. His crown of creation was Adam and Eve whom He created in His image as male and female.

The Lord's ghastly abhorrence of homosexual activity was underscored many times in the Old Testament. The Sodomite cities were judged with fire and brimstone and later buried under the Dead Sea (Gen. 19:5). One of the reasons God ordered the Canaanite population destroyed was its homosexual abominations (Lev. 18:22-29). The land itself was ready to "spew" them out. After Israel entered the land, the Lord ordered the near annihilation of the tribe of Benjamin for their failure to discipline the homos (Jud. 19-21). This the Lord saw as a disease requiring radical surgery, destroying all but a remnant of 600 men to preserve the tribe.

In the New Testament Jesus didn't need to remind Israel of this, but Paul solemnly warned the Romans. To those despising God's truth of creation, Paul said, "God gave them over to degrading passions," citing homosexual activities by both women and men (Rom. 1:25-27). The result? They received "in their own persons the due penalty for their error." Though God may not afflict with fire, HIV, or other plagues in this age of grace, He does allow nature to take its awesome toll. It is nature's way of cleansing itself for sheer survival.

Moral balance, however, does not call for personal vindictiveness. As Jesus did not come to judge but to show mercy, His people are called to a similar mission. The fatally wounded need mercy and sympathy, not spite. That need will doubtless mount in the days ahead as the victims multiply and fall all around us. Showing mercy, however, does not mean justifying its cause. It

does not mean commending the lifestyle that produced it. It means proper attention to its victims, but not toleration of its cause which the Lord many times condemned. How much we all need the grace and wisdom to discern the difference!

The basic cause of immorality, however, finds its roots in an even deeper source. It is rooted in a twisted attitude of life that worships the lower passions. As Paul prophesied concerning the last days, pleasure today is the essence of life. It has replaced love for God as the center of life. Entertainment, sports, and partying are where the money is -- and where the people are. The Observance of Sunday or the Sabbath as a day of worship is as archaic as the horse-and-buggy for our "enlightened," entrepreneurial age. That day of divine worship has been re-baptized as a national day of shopping, pleasure, and recreation -- and the people love to have it so!

A Look At Our Scholarly World

As a Jewish scholar, Paul held the plumbline also to our intellectual world. His prophetic scrutiny saw mental disorientation in the "last days." Though he envisioned great advances in learning, he saw the final days as a time of increased blindness to spiritual truth. That blindness will, in fact, eventually harden into fierce opposition (2 Tim. 3:7-8). The apostle saw this rejection of the faith as leading to a state of mental depravity.

We wince at such a forecast and wonder if the apostolic seer misread His vision of our age of "brilliance." The truth is that this paradox has indeed settled into American education, especially in the last fifty years. Though most of our great universities were originally established to train ministers of the gospel, they have now become "command and control centers for the war against Christianity." Courses in Satanism and heathen philosophies are offered and often promoted to "broaden" one's education, while the Bible and Judeo-Christian thinking are considered offensive and taboo.

The scary fact is that many school campuses now provide condoms and abortion clinics for students, but regard Bible instruction on morals as almost a felony. Secular wisdom has willed it so. Having tied morals to religion, they make moral training a bigoted country-cousin to education. Even our Supreme Court has acquiesced to this discounting of biblical truth, denying the mention of God or prayer in our schools. In their own mystical prescience, our highest judicial thinkers have deduced this from our Constitution, a document admittedly crafted under the divine guidance of the Almighty. Having shut God out of its schools, modern education has lost its direction and finds itself engulfed in a roaring sea of inflamed passions, without even a north star on which to get a moral fix.

This is not to suggest that our schools are irreligious in education, but that humanism has usurped its place of authority. It has a concocted system of values that is almost fanatical in commitment. Among both intellectuals and the superstitious, New Age philosophies of Eastern cults are on the rise. They make their appeal however, to the mystical mind rather than the aching heart. In this oppressive atmosphere of humanism, biblical supernaturalism is often smiled or snarled at as a relic of the dark ages, while Aquarius mythologies are peddled as

spiritual panaceas. For them the answer to man's quest for meaning lies in the notion of upward mobility through reincarnation, rather than in the biblical doctrine of resurrection.

This rejection of biblical truth, however, is not a call for believers to wring their hands. Pessimistic timidity is itself an abomination. It is rather a call to a more committed faith in confronting this paradox in education, long ago predicted. It is one of the things the apostle Paul said we should look for in discerning the nearness of the Lord's return. And the latest readings give every evidence that the apostle was again right on target.

A Look At The Religious World

This popularity of secular religion parallels also the Bible's warning of the decline of true faith in the last days. Jesus described His return as a time of scant "faith on the earth" (Luke 18:8). Rather than resorting to prayer, Jesus said, many believers will seek social justice through pressure tactics. The hardships of active faith will be replaced by social schemes that seemingly bring quicker results. This is a reminder that the last days scenario will be one in which many of the saints are so preoccupied with the world that they have little genuine, active faith in God. They will easily give up on prayer.

Paul also described those days as a time "when they will not endure sound doctrine," but "will turn aside to myths" (2 Tim. 4:3-4). Bible doctrine will lose its scintillation for many in favor of myths that entertain rather than enlighten or convict. In place of biblical truths that grip the heart, many in the church will prefer pleasurable snippets that tickle the ears and soothe the conscience. These entertain the emotions without provoking hard decisions.

The vulnerable church The pity is that much of this superficiality is disgustingly rife today. Though the Bible is still the world's best seller, for many it is more of a fetish than a vital channel of God's power. Some see it as "good advice" for healthy living, or practical prudence for pious prosperity. Others use it as a pretext to fortify a pet bias on some social or religious issue. In the bargain the Lord's real message in the context is too often missed. As Paul said, it can become merely a facade of godly form without life or power.

We need constant reminders that the Bible is God's richest legacy to man with unlimited potential for spiritual power. So grand is the Lord's regard for it that the Psalmist said, "you have exalted your word above all your name" (Ps. 138:2). With this Word alone, Jesus put the devil to flight (Matt. 4:4-10). It is the one thing the Lord promised to bless in ministry, without which there can be no real life or power.

The religious world. This departure from true doctrine applies even more, of course, to the world at large. Two prominent Bible offshoots illustrate this doctrinal departure, Judaism and Islam. Both grew out of basic truths of God's Word, but both rejected the Christological core of God's redemption in Christ Jesus. Each then developed its own "New Testament" (Talmud and Koran) giving revisionist interpretations to biblical truths. The crowning error of each is similar; both dethrone the God-Man Jesus, pointing to the coming of another messiah or prophet. Having built a colossus of man-made doctrines, each resorts to human means to implement them – intellectual genius, will power, or military might.

These are classic examples that typify the opposition of false doctrines in the last days. The astounding thing is how they sustain themselves in numbers and commitment. Though both are fractured within, each has a defiant unity that makes it almost impregnable. Islam today is in a period of great numerical growth, unprecedented since the tidal wave of their early centuries. With nearly a billion adherents, they are now the fastest growing religion in the world (having doubled in forty years). Their mosques encircle the globe, seeking to penetrate every race and culture. Though the Bible is the world's best-seller, the Koran is the world's most-read book. They claim without apology to have a word from God that supersedes that of the New Testament gospel of Christ.

The power of the gospel. These distortions, however, do not mean that true evangelism is dead, or even sleeping. The gospel was made for times like these. It has always thrived on opposition, as church history abundantly testifies. If the formal shell of Christianity has gone stagnant in many areas, the preaching of the gospel is having a heyday in unbelievable places. The breakup of world communism, for instance, has left millions without moral foundations, creating an ideal vacuum for meeting spiritual needs. Many doors in Eastern Europe have opened to evangelism, allowing unprecedented Bible reading and teaching even in their public schools. The hunger for freedom there has provoked an overwhelming response to the gospel. Morally adrift, many look to the West for both economic and spiritual help in their time of shattered foundations.

Similar breakups of traditional crusts of opposition are evident around the globe. Especially significant are the many previously unevangelized areas such as Korea, Africa, and South America. In China a restless population of over a billion is seemingly primed for spiritual liberation, waiting only for a change of the communist old guard. Some fifty million are already said to be underground believers in that vast land, though many others are "underground" for professing their faith.

This priming for evangelism can also be seen in the United States -- if we look beyond the media buffoonery. Religious music and expressions have been popularized. "Amazing Grace" and "God Bless America" are becoming national anthems. Congressional and presidential prayer breakfasts continue in high places. Many parachurch organizations are penetrating campuses and work forces. The phenomenon of Billy Graham and his world-wide crusades are almost legendary, all in the solid stance of the "old time gospel." Much of this aggressive Christianity is, in fact, expressing itself in the face of a rising tide of cynicism.

These many spiritual undercurrents are obviously not all genuine, but they cannot be written off as "religion as usual." They show that God is forcing all strata of society to think seriously about Jesus, even in indifferent America. The name of Jesus has protruded itself into the mind and consciences of the masses in ways only dreamed of twenty-five years ago. Beneath the stagnant crust of religion or irreligion, the Spirit of God is busy completing His work in many individual hearts.

A Look At the Political World

The struggle of the international world is also of great importance in discerning the end-times. As previously noted, its political buildup will involve several coalitions of nations surrounding the Middle East. Four great blocs of power are identified as involved (Ezek. 38-39; Dan. 11). The northern bloc of "Gog and Magog" is generally seen to be that of the Soviet Union; a southern group of Egypt and her Arab allies appears to fulfill the biblical prophecy of the "south"; and the eastern armies that cross the Euphrates are usually tagged as a coalition of China and Japan. Completing this global polarization is the western alliance of Antichrist from Europe and the West. This last group will constitute a ten-nation federation, which is often seen as developing even now in the European Common Market. Thus the makings of the four political groups seem to be present and ready for what prophecy calls the end-time.

With modern Israel also in place in the midst of this international intrigue, we almost wonder what the Lord is waiting for. Why doesn't He blow the trumpet? Or is all this buildup a mirage?

Basically, most of these parts do fit, but with several obvious problems. The recent breakup of the Soviet Union appears to have thrown a monkey-wrench into the neatly projected drama. Prior to this, her character as an atheistic power seemed ideal to fill the role of Gog and Magog as the Russian Bear attacking God's people in the end-time. That now appears radically changed. With her military and economic powers shattered, the grizzly bear from the north has lost its teeth and is more like a Teddy bear waiting to be cuddled. Should we still view the Russian north as that emerging end-time power of Gog and Magog?

In evaluating this, it is important to remember that prophecy is not determined by current events, but by Scripture. The prophecy of the end-time assault by Gog and Magog from the far north has not changed. That great battle, however, is one that occurs at the mid-point of the tribulation period. Its development as a vicious power in the end-time will take place after the Church's rapture. It will evolve as Antichrist arises in Europe to challenge the northern bloc of Gog and Magog. It is a post-rapture development. The rapid change in the USSR in recent years shows the volatility of the area and its need for reunification.

The same should be recognized concerning Antichrist's coming empire. The European Common Market in development today is certainly interesting, prophetically. But it has no real relation to the ten-nation coalition of Antichrist in the end-time. That organization is also a post-rapture phenomenon which will develop during the first three and one-half years of Antichrist's rule. Its primary significance today is that it suggests an orbit of related interests.

These considerations indicate that though the international scene today is not precisely that of the end-time, it is ideally prepared to slip into that mode as soon as the Church is raptured. That rapture will inevitably bring radical changes in world politics. Its sudden occurrence could very well be the spark to alter many international alliances.

[A Look At The Economic World](#)

Though Paul had little to say of economics, he did describe the perils of the "last days" as partially due to the love of money (2 Tim. 3:1-2). Devotion to money inevitably replaces love for God. In an accelerated way greed will doubtless be a divisive factor as the end draws near.

Our world today is governed by economics perhaps more than anything. The stock market reigns over a fragile kingdom whose lifeline is the flow of currency and commodities. That flow, however, is dependent on its monetary reserves, as well as public confidence which tends to fluctuate with the latest rumors. When its reserves dwindle, its guarantees shrink and public confidence gets nervous, fearing a downturn, depression, or even collapse. All of this is delicately balanced by investors and buyers who gamble over consumer supply and demand. It can be a gambler's Mecca, but it can also domino into financial catastrophe. The ghosts of 1929 keep haunting the market with nightmares of economic collapse and devastating unemployment.

When applied to government, however, those stakes are much higher, for the whole structure stands or falls on the stability of the national treasury. That dependence was greatly increased during the Great Depression when the Federal Reserve Board began controlling banking, commerce, and much of the economy. As Larry Burkett describes it, the Fed then fought the investors' blunders that spawned the Great Depression by assuming the role of "great provider" The Coming Economic Earthquake p. 28). That brought a change in American politics, but it also changed the whole economic structure, making Uncle Sam czar of the dole.

That government rescue was everywhere hailed, as it reestablished public confidence and allowed banks to operate without fear of bankruptcy. It resolved the immediate problem of bread lines and restored a measure of dignity to the down-and-out. But that federal dole also became a weapon of the government to force compliance by all for the common good. Strong measures were taken to regulate commerce, business, and trade. To finance this and stimulate industry, a credit system known as "fractional banking," was instituted, allowing businesses to loan on a fraction of deposits. This stimulated industry, but also began a paper mint of financial reserves. It financed itself by resort to credit, thus inducing inflation. In practical terms, it operated on borrowed money, leaving the "mortgage" for the children to pay. It gave birth to our current plague of rampant deficit spending.

Though useful for emergencies, that policy is potentially disastrous because of the compounding of interest. Its continued use in normal times to feed the country's addiction to the good life has spawned huge budget deficits and even over-budget spending (\$290 billion for 1992). Our current debt of \$3.97 trillion (Oregonian, Oct. 28, 1992) exceeds our total national asset value, much of it owned by foreign investors.

For this reason many economists foresee a bleak future for the U.S. economy. As Burkett noted, "We are headed for an economic earthquake disaster of unparalleled magnitude, and it is difficult to see anything that can be done to avert it at this time" (Coming Economic Earthquake, p. 204). Any debt incurred to create prosperity ultimately destroys it. His projection of that debt ballooning to \$15 trillion by the year 2000 shows its runaway momentum and the difficulty of attracting foreign capital to avert total economic collapse.

Such a collapse with its devastating consequences, of course, would not mean the end of the age or of civilization. But the touted moral leadership of the U.S. has become extremely vulnerable by our greedy and careless monetary policy. The erosion of that leadership could very well contribute to the perilous times of the last days described by Paul.

A Look At The Return of Israel

Though the broader international scene is important, the inauguration of the State of Israel in 1948 is by far the most significant prophetic event of modern times. It is the one phenomenon of our time that makes our age prophetically unique. The observed shadows of four international alliances are important to end-time geopolitics, to be sure; but they are almost meaningless without the political resurgence of Israel. Her regathering to the land is the eleventh-hour mark on the clock of Bible prophecy.

This return of Israel, however, is not to be confused with her final regathering as prophesied. That end-time return, following another great holocaust in the land, will be of a much different character. It will be divinely orchestrated in response to her penitence and reception of Jesus as Messiah-Savior (Zech. 12:10). Such a change of heart shows no signs of developing in Israel today. Though many Jews are indeed responding to the gospel, the nation itself is as adamant as ever in its rejection of Jesus as Messiah.

What then is so prophetic about the modern return of Jews to Israel? How is this an eleventh-hour chime of the prophetic time clock?

Its real significance is that it puts Israel in position to fulfill her end-time role. She is now in the land as a recognized nation. But she is also in need of strong support from foreign powers to survive against a massive foe sworn to destroy her. Any shakeup of world powers after the rapture would make it essential for her to quickly realign with a powerful ally. Though we thrill at her determined action in returning to claim her ancient covenant land, we also recognize that this is not really the return foretold by the prophets. The Lord's promise had specific conditions which she has not met (Deut. 30:1-3). Her defiant will to survive by human resolve (in the arm of the flesh), however, will find its final expression in that end-time covenant she will make with Antichrist. In her present configuration she could easily move into that end-time role.

Summary

Though the Church is not promised prophetic signs prior to Christ's return, it is challenged to be alert to the character of the "last days." Those final days of the church age will be unique in several ways. The most obvious will be their moral degeneracy, spiritual lethargy, scholarly elitism, and religious intolerance of biblical truths. On the political front, a vast realignment of the Middle East is described, especially with respect to the nation of Israel.

Our review of these features reveals some astounding developments. Most of the characteristics of the "last days" appear to be already present today, some almost marking time. Our accelerated pace of life seems to have quickly ripened conditions for the fulfillment of God's

program. Though this ripening process could well be extended, the present world setting appears ready for that return of the Lord in the air.

The real name of the game. In observing this accelerated buildup of world events, however, we must not miss the real point of the story. The stage props of modern culture, science, politics, and social turmoil are only the tools of God's workshop. In it He is calling out a people whom He is fashioning into the image of His Son. Therefore, the dramatic progression of current events does have importance as God arranges His workshop; but it should not be confused with His foremost project. That primary endeavor is the shaping of eternal personalities, implanting in them His divine nature for eternal fellowship.

Recognizing this divine purpose serves to bring the buildup of world events into proper perspective. As the world gears up for its inevitable climax, God offers to individuals of every class and clime the "unspeakable gift" of His Son. Receiving Jesus Christ into one's life brings adoption into God's family and deliverance from the kingdom of darkness. It is the individual's heart response to God's saving activity on his behalf. And it brings about this eternal fellowship between the believer and his God, a relationship designed to bring "fullness of joy" and "pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11).