

Douglas E. Woolley
North Central University
THEO 438 Eschatology
22 December 1999

The Key Biblical Aspects of the Second Coming of Christ

People are intrigued with predictions about the future. God alone accurately knows the whole future, and He has revealed glimpses of it through His infallible Word. The Bible contains many prophecies that "have already been fulfilled" (McDermid 17), and thus God's Word can be relied upon when it proclaims prophecies of future events yet to be fulfilled. The study of the last events of history is called "eschatology." The Second Coming of Christ is described by McDermid as "the outstanding event of biblical eschatology, and all events of the end time are related to it" (21). While not all biblical scholars agree about the specific details of the future, they do agree about the general outline of events given in the Bible:

Jesus will return to earth in power and glory, the dead shall rise, the last judgment will occur, and the members of his church, that "called-out assembly" from every tongue and nation, will live and reign with him in the new heaven and new earth that shall never end. God will separate the disobedient and unbelieving from his children, and those separated out will be excluded from his presence forever. (Clouse, Hosack, and Pierard 44)

Some of the key aspects of the Second Coming of Christ are included in the foretelling of Christ's comings in the Old Testament and in the progressive revelation of His Second Coming in the New Testament. The Bible portrays His Second Coming in two phases: His return in the air to rapture His saints and then His physical return to earth with the saints to defeat Antichrist and to establish a millennial kingdom that will be followed by (and merged into) a never-ending kingdom.

"The Bible's main theme is the coming of God's Messiah into the world. From the first to the final promise it is possible to trace the progressive unfolding of this theme" (Hoyt 55). After the fall of man, God gives the first promise in Genesis 3:15 of the coming Messiah, "the seed of the woman," who will defeat Satan. Although this Scripture was partially fulfilled by Christ's first coming, it will be completely fulfilled when Christ returns victoriously. Hoyt cites numerous Old Testament Scriptures that promise the coming of a "lowly Messiah" (Isa. 53:2-6; cf. Ps. 22:1, 14-18; Dan. 9:26; Zech. 13:7) and a "Great Messiah" (Isa. 9:6-7; cf. Isa. 11:1-5; 49:9-10; Jer. 23:5-8; Dan. 7:13-14; Mal. 3:1-2). However, "not one Old Testament passage declares that Christ will come twice" (59-60). Therefore, the Jewish rabbis tried to reconcile these apparent contradictory characteristics. Some thought that there would be two different Messiahs, and some thought that those passages referring to a suffering Messiah (e.g. Isa. 53) were actually referring to the nation of Israel only and not to a person (Hoyt 60, McDermid 74), and thus the Jews were (and still are) waiting for a "Great Messiah" to appear. "The Old Testament predicted Christ's coming but did not discern a Second Coming. Yet the Gospel writers maintained that Christ clearly taught that He would arise from the dead (Matthew 16:21), return for His saints (John 14:3), and judge the world (John 5:22)" (McDermid 7).

The revelation that the Christ would come twice "became clear only after Christ's first coming, and in the light of His own teachings" (Hoyt 60) that gave a "new perspective on Old Testament prophecy" (12). "In His first coming, Christ fulfilled all the prophecies concerning rejection and suffering [and death] . . . At His Second Coming Christ promises to fulfill the

prophecies concerning power and glory" (60 – 61). The four Gospels clearly show that Christ has come in the flesh, and He promises to come again: "And 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" (NASB John 14:3). Scripture says that "the Lord [Jesus] Himself will descend from heaven" (NASB 1 Thess. 4:16) and "will come in just the same way as [the disciples] have watched Him go into heaven" (NASB Acts 1:11). Since Jesus was taken up to heaven, physically and literally, and the disciples saw it happen with their own eyes, Jesus will return in this same way. In an alternative sense, Christ does "come" and "receive the spirit of every believer at death, but He does not leave heaven to do it" (Hoyt 52). While it is true that Christ and the Father come to dwell in believers through the Holy Spirit (John 14:23) and Christ does come in providential judgment (Rev. 2:5), "these 'comings' are never confused with the grand and final eschatological event which is designated in theology as 'the Second Coming'" (Hoyt 63), where Christ personally, physically, visibly, bodily, and literally returns in the air and to earth.

Another key aspect of Christ's Second Coming is that it will be sudden, imminent and no one will know exactly when He will return. Many Scriptures indicate this (Mat. 24:42-44,50, 25:13; Mark 13:32-33; Luke 12:40; 1 Thess. 5:2). These passages encourage Christians to be ready since Christ can come at any time and describe His return as imminent, which "means that there is no prophesied event that stands between the present moment and the coming of the Lord Jesus" (Hoyt 69). However, other Scriptures indicate that certain important and visible events will happen before Christ returns (Matt. 24:14-30; Mark 13:7-10,22-25; Luke 21:25-27; 2 Thess. 2:1-10; Rom. 11:25-26). The pretribulational premillennial view reconciles these two sets of passages. There is a secret coming for His saints and a separate public triumphant coming with His saints after seven years of tribulation on the earth. "During the seven-year interval all the signs that have not yet been fulfilled (the great tribulation, the false prophets with signs and wonders, the antichrist, the salvation of Israel, and the signs in the heavens) will be fulfilled, so that there is no tension at all between waiting for a coming that could occur 'at any moment' and realizing that a later coming will be preceded by many signs" (Gruden 1100). Hoyt concurs that the "signs have reference to the revelation of Christ in glory, not necessarily to the rapture" (69).

The Second Coming of Christ takes place in two phases: His return in the air and His return to earth. The most common biblical word used for the eschatological coming of Christ is *parousia*, meaning "presence, coming or arrival". It "refers to the Second Coming of the Lord, but the Second Coming is not just one event taking place at a particular time. Rather it is made up of a series of events" (Zodhiates 1123). "In the Epistles we see the difference between Christ's future coming for his saints (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) and His future returning to set up a kingdom (Romans 15:12; 1 Corinthians 15:25; 2 Timothy 2:12)" and this is further explained in the book of Revelations (McDearmid 7, 73).

The first phase is called the "rapture." "It's a non-Biblical word used to describe a thoroughly Biblical event" (Carlson 103). The rapture includes the translation and resurrection of all believers. "The translation of the church is the bodily removal from earth to heaven of its saints" (McDearmid 86). At this time, "the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit as wrought through the Church will cease to operate" (Hoyt 127) and Antichrist will be revealed (2 Thess. 2:6-8). "At the coming of Christ in the air, all who have been saved prior to that time will either be resurrected in Christ's likeness or changed to be like Christ. Both the dead and the living saints will become immortal and will be caught up to meet Christ in the air" (157). While in heaven, Christ will be united with the church in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6-9) and the saints will be rewarded in degrees according to their works at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:10-17; 2 Cor.

5:10; Rom. 14:10) (Hoyt 218). Matthew 16:27 says, "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds" (NASB). From heaven, Christ will also unloose three series of judgments upon the earth in the tribulation: the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls (Rev. 4-16).

"The second phase is the revelation when Christ returns to the earth with His bride (1 Thess. 3:13; 2 Thess. 1:7-10)" (Hoyt 71), after which He will "judge Antichrist and set up His kingdom" (Rev. 19:11-16) (McDermid 73). "The climax of judgment upon the world will be Christ's return to the earth, and by means of His presence the tribulation period will be brought to an end (Rev. 19:11-21). At the moment when Antichrist will be about to overwhelm the Jews gathered in Jerusalem, Christ will return to fight for His people (Zech. 12:8; 14:3)" (Hoyt 160) who are at this moment crying out for the coming of their Messiah (Matt. 23:37-39). The Battle of Armageddon (Rev. 16:12-16) results in the "wholesale destruction of Israel" and eventually most of their enemies, but it also results "in the complete salvation of the nation of Israel" as they receive grace to recognize their true Messiah and "their guilt in relation to Him" (Zech 12:9-10; 13:6) (Hoyt 164 – 65). McDermid describes "the return of Jesus Christ in great power and glory with His saints" as "the greatest supernatural event of Revelation." Furthermore, "this event will bring about the destruction of Antichrist, the salvation of Israel, and the setting up of Christ's kingdom" (127). "The mediatorial kingdom will be a time when the saints shall rule and reign with Christ on earth. This period will be ushered in when Christ returns to the earth (Matthew 24:30 and 25:31), and it will end just before the Great White Throne judgment (Revelations 20:4-11)" (McDermid 22), at which time it will transition into the never-ending kingdom that will occupy the new heaven and the new earth. "The ultimate results of Christ's coming include the establishment of peace on earth, social justice, the restoration of the natural order to its original state, the transformation of human nature and all people made righteous, and finally the creation of the new heaven and new earth" (Clouse, Hosack, and Pierard 102).

It is important to study what Scripture states about the end times and to apply that knowledge in preparation for the Second Coming of Christ, for Jesus Himself says, "and behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book" (NASB Rev. 22:7). According to Clouse, Hosack, and Pierard, when Christ returns, "something big is going to happen, but the purpose of eschatology is not so much to tell us the details of what will happen in the future as to call us to holy living in the present" (178). Continuing with this practical perspective, the authors state:

The goal of genuinely meaningful eschatological thinking through the ages was not so much setting forth some specific structure of God's plan for the future as it was assuring Christians that such a plan existed in the first place. Such thinking was designed to provide comfort to believers in troubled times. The promise of redemption is sure; the wicked and unfaithful will not always triumph. The injuries suffered by the innocent and the righteous will not forever go unnoticed and unpunished. God will ultimately deliver his church. (180)

The hope of the church throughout the centuries has been that Christ will return, just as He said He would, and establish a blessed life for His followers throughout eternity. Instead of excessively speculating about the Second Coming of Christ, many "great Christians of history have felt satisfied to believe that one day they shall experience Christ in a closer way, whether it be by his return or their death" (Clouse, Hosack, and Pierard 179). The church should continue to hope and say, "Come, Lord Jesus" (NASB Rev. 22:20b).

Works Cited

- Carlson, Raymond G. *Our Faith and Fellowship*. Springfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1977.
- Clouse, Robert G., Robert N. Hosack, and Richard V. Pierard. *The New Millennium Manual: A Once and Future Guide*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999.
- Gruden, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994.
- Hoyt, Herman A. *The End Times*. Winona Lake, Indiana: BMH Books, 1969.
- McDearmid, Andrew. *Eschatology: A Study Guide*. Irving: ICI University Press, 1980.
- New American Standard Bible. La Habra, Ca: The Lockman Foundation, 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977.
- Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. Iowa Falls, Iowa: World Bible Publishers, Inc., 1992.