

Postmillennialism
and the
Imminent Return of Christ

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Introduction¹

Perhaps what appears to be the strongest objection put forward against postmillennialism,² the doctrine that Christ will come back after a golden age period of Christianity on earth (Ps. 22:26-31; 67; 72:8-11; Isa. 2:2-5; 11:9; 19:18-25; 65:17-25; Zech. 14:16-21; Rom. 11:12-26; 1 Cor. 15:24-25; Rev. 11:15; etc.), is that it denies the imminent return of Christ. Richard Gaffin writes that “postmillennialism deprives the church of the imminent expectation of Christ’s return and so undermines the quality of watchfulness that is incumbent on the church.”³ If a person knows that certain prerequisites to Christ’s second coming have not been fulfilled, and probably will not be fulfilled in one’s lifetime, then one is dissuaded from watchfulness and careful, righteous living in the light of the any-moment return of Christ. This objection that Christ could come back at any moment, and its ethical corollaries, will be met head on and the Biblical data will be shown to be fully consistent with a robust postmillennialism.

According to Richard Gaffin, a reformed amillennialist,⁴ “Christ could have returned at virtually any time since the ministry of the apostles.”⁵ It should be noted that this is not a historically reformed position, but has been popularized recently in reformed circles from the prevalent influence of dispensationalism.⁶

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² Postmillennialism means that Christ will come back after the millennium found in Rev. 20:4. This is distinguished from Amillennialism (‘no-millennium’) and Premillennialism (Christ comes before the millennium occurs). Premillennialism, as it necessarily involves multiple Resurrections and Judgments and is hence contrary to the Westminster Standards (i.e. W.C.F. chs. 32-33), will not be interacted with here.

³ Richard B. Gaffin “Theonomy and Eschatology: Reflections on Postmillennialism,” in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, ed. William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 218.

⁴ There is quite a wide range of sub-views within this broad term ranging from amillennialists who have a ‘pessimistic’ or ‘optimistic’ outlook for the progress of the Gospel throughout the world in Church history, that the millennium (Rev. 20:4) speaks of saints ruling in heaven, that the promises describing the millennial period are (only) spiritual, etc.

⁵ Gaffin, “Theonomy and Eschatology,” 219.

⁶ Dispensationalism was popularized in the late-1800’s (but especially in the early-1900’s), is

O.T. Allis, as late as 1947, describes this 'any moment' doctrine as one of "the great fundamentals of dispensationalism."⁷ Classical dispensationalism teaches that the Church Age is a parentheses in God's time-plan and purposes; hence no Scriptural prophecies spoke of it. If this is the case, then there are no prophecies that must be fulfilled during the Church Age before Christ comes again in a secret rapture; Christ can come at any time. Loraine Boettner in 1957 critiqued the any-moment return position not under his section on amillennialism, but under dispensationalism.⁸ The amillennialism that came out of the reformation largely interpreted the book of Revelation in a historicist⁹ fashion, understanding that there are numerous prophecies that need to be fulfilled in history before Christ can come again. John Murray, indicative of typical reformed thought on this subject up into the first half of the 20th century, rightly said, "the insistence that the advent is imminent is... without warrant, and its falsity should have been demonstrated by events."¹⁰ This objection then, that "that no predicted events remain to be fulfilled, and that there are therefore no signs to herald the Coming,"¹¹ is of recent origin, and reflects outside influences more than it does historic reformed thought.

One way to harmonize an any-moment return of Christ for the present era

always Premillennial and makes strong divisions between God's various dispensations of his dealings with his people throughout the Bible, especially between God's plan for physical Israel in the Old Testament and his plan for the Church in the New Testament. As this is not a historic or creedal view in Christianity and is contrary to the Westminster Standards, it will not be interacted with in this article.

⁷ Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 1999) 204.

⁸ Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 1957) 248 ff.

⁹ Historicism refers to understanding the book of Revelation as largely prophesying of historical events through Church history, from Christ's first coming to his second coming (this being consistent with the book also using spiritually symbolic language and ideals edifying to the Church). This was the dominant view of the Reformation and puritan eras. It is also the teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) in that ch. 25.6 says that the Pope of Rome is, in the present tense, in the 1600's, 'that antichrist'. This was also the teaching of numerous other confessions in Reformed theology's classical era. Most postmillennialists in the contemporary era are either historicists or partial-preterists, though it is possible to hold to postmillennialism and to futurism (that Revelation speaks mainly of future events) or idealism (that Revelation speaks of spiritual, edifying ideals, not necessarily historical events).

¹⁰ Mathison, *Postmillennialism*, 204.

¹¹ Boettner, *Millennium*, 248.

while retaining the substance of a historically reformed eschatology is to define the nature of the millennium in such a way that it coheres with the *status quo* of things as they exist in our present world. Thus, all the millennial blessings in Scripture (Ps. 22:26-31; 67; 72:8-11; Isa. 2:2-5; 11:9; 19:18-25; 65:17-25; Zech. 14:16-21; Rom. 11:12-26; 1 Cor. 15:24-25; Rev. 11:15; etc.) speak no better or farther than the (lamentable) state of affairs which currently characterizes our world. As there are no further prophecies that must take place, Christ may come at any moment. Besides that this world's current state does not do justice to these Scriptural prophecies, this view¹² seeks to hold together two contrary principles. An any-moment return of Christ is held at the expense of the Scripturally promised blessings of the millennium. This is one way to handle the objection of an any-moment return of Christ; however it does not deal with the heart of the issue: Does the Bible teach an any-moment return of Christ?

Greg Bahnsen, a postmillennialist, answers this question clearly: "the fact is that postmillennialism never claimed to salvage the doctrine of the any-moment return of Christ; indeed, distinctive to it is the denial of the imminent physical return."¹³ Keith Mathison, a postmillennialist writing in reference to passages about the return of Christ, says that "nothing is said of the nearness of the second coming."¹⁴ Loraine Boettner writes that "it is true that Postmillennialists normally do not expect the Second Coming during their lifetime."¹⁵ To answer the charge that this view produces moral laxity and careless living, Donald McLeod replies that "to expect the Lord in our life-time is not a pre-requisite for true piety - this would be to base the Christian life, in most generations, upon a falsehood."¹⁶

¹² This view often falls under the term 'optimistic' amillennialism, though strangely enough it fits 'pessimistic' amillennialism as well. Some supporters of it label themselves as postmillennialists.

¹³ Greg L. Bahnsen "The Prima Facie Acceptability of Postmillennialism," in *Victory in Jesus: The Bright Hope of Postmillennialism* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Press, 1999), 65.

¹⁴ Mathison, *Postmillennialism*, 205.

¹⁵ Boettner, *Millennium*, 249.

¹⁶ Donald McLeod, "The Second Coming of Christ," *Banner of Truth*, Nos. 82-83 (July/Aug. 1970) 20, as quoted in Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 436.

Two Issues

Two issues are clear in entering into this subject. (1) On any view, pre-, a-, or postmillennialism, the language in the New Testament which speaks of the Lord being at hand and near in reference to His second coming cannot be taken in a temporal/linear sense. If it is, then the Bible is mistaken as 2000 years have passed without His coming; the liberals win. Temporal language, which every view has to explain, is not the issue. The real question is, are there events that must occur before Christ's second coming, and are any of these events future to us?

(2) Almost every view posits some thing or things that must occur before the second coming. Hence, not just postmillennialists, but nearly every view has to reconcile imminent language in the New Testament as a motive to godly living, with the reality that prophecies that have not come to pass must happen first. Dispensationalists who cry the loudest proclaiming the any-moment coming of Christ in the rapture, are the first to analyze, speculate and quote Scriptures regarding the signs that will precede this sign-less coming. They say that the temple must be built, true Levites and red heifers must be found, recipes of the show-bread determined, and true Christians must be reduced in number to about the size of Noah's family, all before Christ can return at any moment (even though these things have not occurred). Amillennialists of a futurist orientation¹⁷ posit an Anti-Christ, a great tribulation, world devastating plagues, and many other things that must be fulfilled before Christ can come again. Morton H. Smith, a reformed amillennialist, writes that, "all the other views [besides dispensationalism] tend to have certain elements of negative dating, which would take away the idea from the immediate imminence of His return."¹⁸

¹⁷ Futurism holds that most the book of Revelation prophecies of future events at the end before the second coming of Christ.

¹⁸ As quoted in Mathison, *Postmillennialism*, 204.

The only school that can plausibly hold to an imminent return of Christ, and hence hold it out as an objection to other views, is the amillennial idealist,¹⁹ who either makes prophecies into general patterns of the inter-advental age or spiritualizes them so that they lose any specific historical referent. Upon the admission in that view that an increase in wickedness, persecution, famines, disasters, wars and apostasy must increase in extent and intensity before Christ may come again, many proponents play the agnostic and say that one is not able to know or determine whether this has happened (except retrospectively after Christ comes). This however contradicts the numerous Biblical indicators that Christians will hear of these precursors (Mt. 24:6), see these things (Mt 24:15) understand and discern them (1 Th. 5:4; Mt. 24:15; Rev. 1:1,3; 13:9,18; 17:9; Dan. 12:10), take action upon them (Mt. 24:16-18), and know the times (Mt. 24:32-33; 1 Th. 5:1; 2 Th. 2:6).²⁰ The detailed, specific, and sequential nature of numerous prophecies in the New Testament, often with temporal, geographic and personal referents, stands in contrast against some amillennial idealists' claim to prophetic agnosticism concerning events between the two advents. Their own position is not adequate to sustain the objection of an any-moment return against other views.

Any-Moment Proponents in the New Testament

There were many proponents of the any-moment coming of Christ in the New Testament. Christ speaks of one such person in Lk. 12:45, "If that servant say in his heart, 'My Lord delays His coming...'" Because the servant expected an any-moment return, he did not plan to wait a long time and hence was unprepared when, after a long delay, His master did come. The master's coming was unexpected (v. 46) precisely because it was so far off. Because he believed in

¹⁹ The name idealism refers to most of the book of Revelation holding out spiritual ideals for the Church to be instructed and edified by, rather than the prophecies referring to historical events. Many idealists though, do hold that historical events are indicated in some of Revelation's prophecies.

²⁰ Likewise, the prophecies in the book of Daniel regarding the inter-Testamental era were not meant simply to be retrospective, but could be historically discerned to some extent as they were happening.

an any-moment return, he was not diligent in his duty in the long haul and was beaten with many stripes, (v. 47).

We find any-moment proponents in Lk. 19:11 who thought that “the kingdom of God should immediately appear.” Does Christ encourage this? He tells them of a parable in which, “a certain nobleman went into a far country,” (v. 12). The nobleman tells his servants to “Occupy till I come,” (v. 13). This implies a long period of time. The servants had time to multiply their loaned money through ordinary business practices, some five-fold and some ten-fold. The master even suggests putting the money in the bank to collect interest over time to one who did nothing with it. Cornelius Venema, a reformed amillennialist, comments on this passage that it describes “events whose fulfillment cannot take place without a considerable period of time elapsing.”²¹ Notice the ethical implications of this passage and the passage in Luke 12, that the motivation for the servant’s diligent service was not an any-moment return, but that they would be rewarded upon their master’s certain return which was far off.

The foolish virgins in the parable in Mt. 25:1-13 had bought into the doctrine of the any-moment return. They did not prepare to wait out the long haul and take extra oil because they thought the bridegroom’s return may happen at any moment (v. 3). The wise virgins expected to wait a long time and were found faithful (vv. 4,10). Boettner writes, “just in proportion as the early Christians understood the teaching of Jesus they could not have expected His early return.”²²

The Christians that Paul spoke to in 1 Thessalonians misunderstood him and thought he meant that Christ could and might return at any moment. Thus, some of them stopped working, waiting for Christ to return. In 2 Thessalonians Paul corrects this and tells them what must happen before Christ can come back (2 Th. 2:2-3). He also tells them that whoever does not work should not eat. He

²¹ Cornelius P. Venema, *The Promise of the Future* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000) 104.

²² Boettner, *Millennium*, 252.

exhorts them, as postmillennialists do their brothers that differ with them, “that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread.” Christ has commanded us to “Occupy, till I come,” (Lk. 19:13).

Christ’s Coming: Not in Paul’s Lifetime

It is commonly assumed that the New Testament church thought that the Lord may come back in their lifetime. This however is not the case. Paul expected to die before the Lord came back. To the elders at Ephesus he said, “I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock,” (Acts 20:29). To Timothy he writes, “For I am already being offered, and the time of my departure is come,” (2 Tim. 4:6,7). In 1 Th. 5:10, Paul, using an euphemism for death, tells his readers that they may die before the Lord’s return: “that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together for Him.”

The language Paul uses may seem to include himself among the people that may be alive when Christ returns when he uses the pronoun ‘we’ in both 1 Th. 4:15 and 1 Cor. 15:51-52. If this ‘we’ in fact does include Paul, however, then it does not show the immanency of Christ’s return, but it shows that Paul was schizophrenic (in light of the verses quoted above) and that the liberals are right and Paul was mistaken. The correct understanding of these verses is that Paul is using ‘we’ in an indefinite sense. The ‘we’ is the set of Christians, of which Paul is a part. However the pronoun is limited in its extent to an even narrower set of people by the phrase qualifying it: those “which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord.” Paul is not a part of this latter group, nor did he think he was, as this group is indefinite and unknown.

Christ’s Coming: Far Off

The first century Christians that held to an imminent return of Christ after

His ascension were rebuked: "And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven?" (Acts 1:10-11) It was only a few verses before that they had expected the imminent setting up of the kingdom in glory without any intervening events. The disciples asked Christ, "wilt Thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (v. 6) Christ responds that something had to happen first: "Ye shall be witnesses unto Me... unto the uttermost parts of the earth," (v. 8, see also Mt. 24:14). This parallels the Great Commission that the church is to "Go... and teach all nations, baptizing them... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you," (Mt. 28:19-20). Boettner writes, "surely as the apostles came to realize the magnitude of the task that was to be accomplished in the Christian era these considerations were sufficient to discourage any idea of an immediate or speedy return of Christ."²³

The great commission would not be complete until the times of the gentiles were filled up. The deliberate vagueness of this phrase implies a vast amount of time. "And Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled," (Lk. 21:24). "A hardening in part hath befallen Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be brought in," (Rom. 11:25). Boettner comments that "even a primitive Christian might be expected to understand that the duration of the Kingdom in Gentile hands might reasonably be expected to be in proportion to the time that it had previously been in Jewish hands."²⁴

Thus, it was prophesied that after the apostles died off (2 Pet. 3:2-4) persons in the Church²⁵ who had expected Christ to come back quickly (even within the lifetime of the apostles, vv. 2-4, as many liberal theologians) would begin to scoff at the promise of Christ's second coming. The Scripturally provided answer is that 'one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.' (2 Pet. 3:8) Is it not noteworthy that this verse

²³ *Ibid.*, 251.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ They call the apostles (2 Pet. 3:2) 'fathers' (v. 4).

speaks of at least a thousand years with respect to Christ's coming? Many persons pick up on the second half of the verse, that a thousand years is with the Lord as one day, but miss the first half of the verse, that 'one day', or language of imminence and Christ coming 'quickly' (Rev. 20:7,20) in the New Testament, is as a thousand years with God.

Second Thessalonians chapter two specifically warns us against those who would "deceive" (v. 3) us with the doctrine of an imminent second coming of Christ, "as that the day of Christ is at hand... for that day shall not come except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition." The chapter is filled with many specific things that must happen before Christ can come again. Venema, speaking of the second coming, says "other passages speak of it as an event that will only occur at some future time, after certain events that must precede it have occurred."²⁶

'Comings' in the New Testament

It must be in light of the previous material that we should examine the passages in the New Testament which appear to some to teach an imminent return of Christ. They fall into two categories: (1) those that appear to teach the coming is soon, and (2) those that teach that the time of the coming is unknown and will be unexpected.²⁷ At the outset, it should be noted that the word and idea of 'coming' in the New Testament is used in a variety of ways. Boettner delineates at least eight (the Scriptures are those which he lists):²⁸

1. The coming of Christ to the Christian at death (Mt. 25:13; 24:42,44);
2. The coming of God or of Christ in providential Judgment (Mt. 24:29-30,34; Mk. 14:61-62; Isa. 13:9-10; 19:1-4; 34:4-5; Mic. 1:3-5);
3. The coming of Christ to His disciples after His resurrection (Jn.

²⁶ Venema, *The Promise*, 97.

²⁷ See *Ibid.* generally for a similar classification in 3 categories.

²⁸ See Boettner, *Millennium*, 253-262.

14:18,28; 16:16,28);

4. The coming of Christ on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21,33);
5. The coming of Christ to the Churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 2:5,16; 3:20);
6. The coming of Christ to various cities in Palestine during His public ministry (Mt. 9:35; 10:23; Lk. 4:43; 10:1);
7. The coming of Christ to believers (Mt. 18:20; Jn. 14:21,23);
8. The final, personal, visible, glorious coming of Christ at the end of the age.

The context is the main indicator which determines which of these senses is being referred to in any given passage.

Passages: Christ Coming in the Lifetime of the Hearers

(1) The passages that appear to teach that the coming of Christ is soon. Within this category of passages, there are three verses which may be speaking of Christ's coming within the lifetime of his hearers. Note that these verses do not directly bear on the question of an imminent Second Coming of Christ. If Christ's Second Coming was in the first generation of the hearers, then He cannot come now at anytime. These verses hence require an explanation by every eschatological view within orthodox Christianity²⁹ simply for Christianity to exist.

(A) Mt. 24:34 says "this generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled." Partial-preterists³⁰ (most of which in the contemporary era are

²⁹ Hyper-preterism (in distinction from partial-preterism) posits that Christ's Second Coming was in the past at A.D. 70 (aligning with the destruction of the Temple), within the first generation of hearers. However they have to hold that this Second Coming was not bodily but only spiritual, along with significantly changing nearly every other doctrine of Christianity. Hence they are not a part of historically, orthodox Christianity.

³⁰ The term 'preter' in the name refers to the past. Partial-preterists interpret most of the book of Revelation as speaking of the judgments upon Israel in the Romans coming against them in war from A.D. 67-70. Many interpreters through history have considered some passages in the

postmillennialists) understand the previous section of Mt. 24:4-36 as speaking about the imminent destruction about to fall upon Jerusalem in A.D. 70 by the hands of the Romans. Hence they believe that this terminology about this generation not passing falls under category two above: the coming of Christ in providential judgment upon a nation. However there are significant reasons to take at least numerous parts of the first half of Mt. 24 as referring to the future Second Coming of Christ (24:14,22,27,29-31,35) and for Mt. 24:4-14 to be speaking of the greater part of the Church Age, as historicist postmillennials understand the chapter. In this case, 'this generation' may be qualitative, referring to the sinful character of the people (c.f. Mt. 3:7; 11:16; 12:34,39, 41-42,45; 17:17; 23:33; Mk. 8:12,38; 9:19; Acts 2:40; Heb. 3:10;), which generation of people will always be present until Christ comes again.

(B) Mt. 10:23 says, "Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come." (C) Matt 16:28 speaks in a similar vein: "there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death till they see the Son of man coming in His Kingdom." It is not grammatically possible to take the language of these two verses in any other sense than a quick, temporal fulfillment.³¹ The coming spoken of in these verses may be classed under categories two, three, four, six and seven above. They probably overlap all of these categories (Christ's public ministry, resurrection, Pentecost, by the Holy Spirit, and national judgment upon Israel), as they are all aspects of the complex of events that is referred to here by Christ's coming. This is why, though the final judgment is spoken of in Mt. 16:25-27, verse 28 of the same chapter can change referents without explicit notice: because the events of the first coming in the kingdom determine and are tied up with the events that will happen at the second coming. Together they are a unitary whole. The prophetic imagery and language preserves this conception.

New Testament to refer to this (such as in Mt. 24), yet are not generally considered to be preterists. Partial-Preterists often attribute more passages in the New Testament to A.D. 70 than other interpreters (namely every passage that could be, yet while remaining in the bounds of historical orthodoxy). Hyper-Preterism refers to the view that attributes virtually every prophecy in the New Testament to A.D. 70, including that of the second coming of Christ.

³¹ See Venema, *The Promise*, 97-103.

Passages for an Imminent Coming of Christ?

Rom. 13:11-12 reads, "Knowing the time, that it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand." 2 Cor. 6:2 is similar: "Behold, now is the accepted time; Behold now is the day of salvation." These verses are to be understood in light of 1 John 2:8-11,

"A new commandment I write unto you... because the darkness is past, and the true light now shines. He that says he is in the light and hates his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loves his brother abides in the light. But he that hates his brother is in darkness, and walks in darkness, and knows not where he goes, because the darkness has blinded his eyes."

The verse before this passage in 1 John says that this commandment to love one another is not new but old (1 Jn. 2:7). It is new in light of the new redemptive history and the progression of revelation. The light symbolizes living righteously. The thrust is ethical. The Romans passage goes on saying, "Let us therefore cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day," (Rom. 13:11-12). The context of the Corinthian passage is similar. These passages may be speaking of the growth of the kingdom of righteousness in our acceptance with God and sanctification. Salvation is not uncommonly used in Scripture in these senses. If the Romans passage is referring to the Second Coming, it is consistent with that Second Coming and Day of Redemption (Rom. 8:21-25) happening long after our deaths. As each moment of this life passes away, we have greater reason for urgency in living holily before Him as time shortens till our death and his awaited coming again. Eternity, the rising Day of Hope for Christians, is but a short while away in comparison with our evaporating life in this world (James 4:14).

Phil. 4 :5 states abruptly, "the Lord is at hand." The context of this verse is devoid of any language of judgment or eschatology. The surrounding verses

speak of the practice of godly living, but especially of the spiritual presence of the Lord (vv. 4,7,9). Thus it is likely that this verse is not to be taken in a linear-temporal sense regarding the second coming. It can be taken in various ways, the most probable being that the Lord's presence is near spiritually (see Ps. 16:8), as we live before the face of God, (Ex. 20:3). Thus, we are to 'be careful for nothing, but in every thing... let your requests be made known unto God,' (Phil. 4:6) precisely because He is near at hand with us. Phil. 4:5 may also be signifying that the Lord is ready to interpose in providential judgment (see categories two and five above). The verse could also be emphasizing the certainty and relative shortness of time till the final judgment, as a 1,000 years with God is as a day (2 Pet. 3:8). The judgment, though far off, is as certain as if it is already here.

Heb. 10:25 speaks of "exhorting one another... as you see the day approaching." As the larger context suggests, the verse may have some reference to the doing away of the old ceremonial system as the better promises of the New Covenant have come. There is now a greater knowledge of truth (10:26) which is out-shining the old covenant elements which were fading away at that time. The day of the kingdom was rising above the horizon in that generation before whole Temple administration was wiped away in the decades after. However the 'day' in Heb. 10:25 likely has more reference to Judgment Day as the inspired writer exhorts them to look to the Lord for recompense in knowing that they 'have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.' (Heb. 10:30,35) Thus these Christians 'have need of patience' that they 'might receive the promise' (Heb. 10:36), which likely was not coming to them in this life. Truly Judgment Day is 'approaching' as each moment goes by.

Verse 37 continues: 'For yet a little while, and He that shall come will come, and will not tarry.'" The partial-preterist interpretation is that this may refer to Christ spiritually coming in providence and destroying the temple and old covenant system in A.D. 70 along with those who had apostatized back to Judaism (vv. 25-31) and were persecuting the Christians. This though, is hard to

reconcile with the Christians to whom the writer to the Hebrews is writing receiving rewards for their afflictions (vv. 34-36), which did not happen in A.D. 70. The verse is more likely using the language of fore-shortening and compression to speak of the second coming as so certain and sure that, in eschatological language, it is just around the corner. As Davis points out, such language is common in the Old Testament for events that were separated by hundreds of years.³² The verse does not imply that the second coming is literally about to happen for the original hearers. Rather, they are to 'endure,' and "are in need of patience," (v. 32,36). The next chapter (Heb. 11) sets as examples those believers which "did not accept [physical] deliverance," (v. 35) were killed (v. 37), and "received not the promise" (v. 39) in this life, waiting for it in the Age to Come. This life is but a short time before the judgment. Truly in light of Eternity man's days are 'few' (Gen. 47:9; Job 10:20; 14:1; 16:22); "we spend our days as a tale that is told... it is soon cut off and we fly away." (Ps. 90:9-10) This is true of the natural man and is it not also true in the experience of the hopeful believer? Do not the years of the bride waiting for her husband to come (Song 2:8) seem like 'but a few days' for the love she has for Him? (Gen. 29:20)

1 Pet. 4:7 says, "The end of all things is at hand, be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer." This cannot mean that the final judgment was about to happen in the first century, or else Peter was a false prophet. The partial-preterist interpretation is not convincing as verse 5 speaks of God who is "ready to judge the living and the dead," which happens at the second coming. Two considerations control the interpretation of this text: judgment is hanging over those who live unrighteously (v. 3-5) and that God is "ready" (v. 5) to judge them. Is not God always ready? The idea is that God is holding back His wrath, which is about to spill over onto them. Their condemnation is so certain, and the balance of their lives so short (Jm. 4:14), that it is as their judgment is at the door (see Jn. 3:18:36). Peter is not saying that the original hearers should spend the rest of their lives in prayer till Christ comes again, but they are to live

³² John Jefferson Davis, *The Victory of Christ's Kingdom: An Introduction to Postmillennialism* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1996) 68-69.

out the years of their life prayerfully as though the last day is before them.

James 5:7-9 says, "Be patient therefore, brethren unto the coming of the Lord... for the coming of the Lord draws near... Behold, the Judge stands before the door." Many interpreters believe that this passage refers to providential judgment coming upon nations or peoples that are lawless (v. 1-6, see category two above). This occurs in history anytime there is an open and sustained breaking of God's laws without repentance. God promises His temporal judgments upon such situations in order that people do not live comfortably and securely in their wickedness.

However this understanding does not seem to be sufficient for the text. The Christians are to have 'long patience' for the coming of the Lord, as a farmer does his crops (James 5:7; note Mt. 13:30) and as the prophets had in 'suffering affliction'. Yet many of the prophets received not deliverance in this life but hoped for the Age to Come. The judgment which the text speaks of will not be only of overt social injustice, but will be equally effective for grudges between believers (James 5:9) which must entail the Final Judgment. The idea and language of the Judge drawing near and standing before the door is similar to what we sing of in Psalm 96:13 and 98:9 about the Lord 'coming' (in the Hebrew) to judge the earth in reference to the second coming. He is on his way; it is but a leap and a bound for Him (Song 2:8). Faith perceives it as imminent and already here, praying that these everlasting doors would be opened (Ps. 24:7-10).

The last set of texts that speak of the nearness of Christ's coming are those in the book of Revelation (22:12,20, 'Behold, I come quickly!'). The partial-preterist interpretation, that most of this book speaks of A.D. 70, strangely makes the casting off of the Jewish unbelievers to be of more paramount focus in God's purview than his prophetic interest, care and protection for his believing saints (Isa. 62:1-7). Rather, Revelation is most naturally interpreted in continuity with the rest of the prophecies of Scripture and especially the book of Daniel, which uses similar symbolic language to narrate the spiritually important

historical events which God's people would endure through her whole history. This rules out the idealist view of Revelation which removes most of the descriptions of this book from referring to actual historical events. What these last words of Christ can't mean is that Christ's coming will happen suddenly without any other events preceding it, for the whole book is full of such events that must happen before Christ comes again! Rather, these last hopeful promises are using compressed eschatological language to reveal Christ's loving heart for us and the certainty of his coming again to receive us and not leave us orphans (Jn. 14:18).

Passages: The Timing of Christ's Coming, Unknown & Unexpected

(2) Passages which teach that the time of Christ's coming is unknown and will be unexpected include the end of Matt 24, the whole of chapter 25, Luke 12:36-48 and the beginning of 1 Thess. 5. In dealing with these passages, two things will be observed: how postmillennialism is in full agreement with these texts, and how the implied ethical corollaries of the text follow, though Christ has not come back, and cannot come back, and will not come back in most Christians' lifetime.

It is worthy to note that these three passages, which are some of the clearest and most extended passages on the second coming in the New Testament, do not speak of its nearness. They merely say that it will be at an unknown time in the distant future. "Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming... therefore you must also be ready, for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect," (Matt 24:42, 44). "Watch, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour," (Matt 25:13). "If the good man of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched... Be ye therefore ready also: for the Son of man comes at an hour when ye think not," (Luke 12:39). "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night," (1 Th. 5:2).

These passages teach that Christ's coming "will not be announced in advance or trumpeted from a distance."³³ On the one hand, the general season of when Christ's coming will occur may be able to be generally discerned by the spiritually faithful (Mt. 24:32-33, 'when ye shall see all these thing, know that it is near, even at the doors'; Rev. 20:7-9), but 'of that day and hour,' that is, specifically when Christ will come again, 'knoweth no man' (Mt. 24:36-37).³⁴ While Postmillennialists believe that after the nations have walked in the light of the Lord for a significant period of history that there will be a falling away from the faith at the end of history before Christ comes (Rev. 20:7-9), yet undoubtedly unbelievers will not believe this to be indicative of anything. Life will be continuing as normal on earth for many or most people (Mt. 24:37-41).³⁵ Three major passages speak of these last days: 2 Tim. 3:1-8, Matt 24:37-41, and 1 Th. 5:3,7. John Jefferson Davis comments that:

The characteristic features of the time appear to be hedonism, materialism, egotism, and hypocrisy in religion: "lovers of self, lovers of money... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it" (2 Tim. 3:2,4-5). This picture is quite consistent with Christ's description of worldly conditions immediately prior to the end (Lk. 17:26-30). During the days of Noah and of Lot, the picture was one of apparent normalcy: eating and drinking, marrying, giving in marriage, buying, selling, planting, building --but then sudden judgment came. This picture of a careless and complacent generation of unbelievers immediately prior to the *Parousia* [Coming] is given as well by Paul in 1 Th. 5:3: "When people say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them."³⁶

This moral laxity will likely not be easily discernible as it may be covered

³³ Venema, *The Promise*, 108-109, n. 1.

³⁴ Even Rev. 19:8-9 is symbolic and vague enough that it appears that the final end will not be able to be certainly predicted or necessarily recognized beforehand from it.

³⁵ There is a tension between the end being like the days of Noah (Mt. 24:37-38) where people continue as normal and the description of Rev. 20:7-19 which appears to depict something of a culminating, imminent catastrophe and annihilation of God's people in war by this world's rulers right before Christ comes to rescue his people.

³⁶ Davis, *The Victory*, 74-75.

with nominal religion, especially after the blessings of the millennium. As professing unbelievers grow proud and careless in worldly prosperity, it will be that much easier for them to become spiritually dull and cease to look and long for Christ's coming again. It will take them by surprise. Once it happens, there will be no possibility for preparing for it. (Mt. 25:10-13)

Yet these texts do not preclude that there will be general and even specific things that must happen between the two advents, and that Christ's coming cannot happen until after these things take place (Matt 24:6, "see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet."). These texts are consistent with the postmillennialist expectation for the conversion of the nations to Christianity for a significant period of earth's history with the attendant spiritual and physical peace and prosperity on earth that will come with it.

Watching is Fundamentally Ethical

The significant force of the imminence argument lies in that Jesus' words, it is said, were given to His original hearers. The only way it could be relevant for them, and spur ethical living, it is argued, is if Christ could come back within the original hearer's life time. However, the commands to watch were not simply given to the twelve disciples that heard Jesus' audible words (Mt. 24:1), but as so many commands in scripture, were given to the church as a covenantal whole (Rom. 15:4, 1 Cor. 10:6). Notice the deliberate second person plural in all of these passages (see the KJV, Mt. 24:42,44; 25:13; 1 Th. 5:5,8,9). The command to watch is for the church in all ages. The church is to be characterized by watchfulness. The individual persons in the parables remain alive for the whole period from when the master leaves till when he comes back. Yet this period is thousands of years. Clearly the persons in the parables represent the church as a whole, not individuals. It is in this context of the corporate nature of the church that these commands are to be understood (the Great Commission is a similar example, Mt.

28:18-20). Thus, these commands do not presuppose or otherwise necessitate that Christ could have come at any point in church history or to any generation of believers. Morton H. Smith writes, “the Bible clearly teaches that we should be prepared for His return at any time, and that He will come unexpectedly as a thief in the night, but this does not necessarily say that it has been imminent for every age of the church’s life.”³⁷

Watching Christians will not be caught off guard by Christ’s coming. 1 Th. 5:4 says, “But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.” This is not because they will know when Christ is coming, or because they are watching the skies (Acts 1:11), but because they will be doing the Lord’s will:

Ye are all children of the light, and children of the day: we are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet the hope of salvation. (1 Th. 5:5-8)

Watching is fundamentally ethical. 1 Cor. 16:13-14 groups watching with the similar ethical characteristics: “Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong. Let all your things be done with charity.” To watch is to live righteously and faithfully unto Christ, knowing, hoping and waiting for his promised coming even if we know that it will not happen in our generation. While we are to always be prepared in this manner, this does not entail that Christ’s coming might be at any time.

The Unexpectedness of Christ’s Coming as a Spur to Godly Living

There are two ethical corollaries which remain to be more fully considered. These are the two questions: (1) How is it that Jesus and Paul use the

³⁷ Mathison, *Postmillennialism*, 204.

unexpectedness of Christ's coming to spur the original individual hearers to godly living and command them to watch if the *parousia* [coming] is not imminent and probably will not happen in their lifetime? (2) Likewise, how can we be spurred on to good works by the unexpected and unknown time of the *parousia* if we have a good idea that it will not happen in our lifetime? It must be remembered that these questions are merely secondary, as the intended audience of the previously examined relevant passages cannot be legitimately narrowed down to solely the original auditory hearers, to us in this generation or any specific generation in Church history. There are three considerations that combine to form the answer to these questions. They will be given in ascending order of priority.

(1) As in category one above, there is the coming of Christ to the Christian at death. When Stephen is about to die, Christ stands to welcome him into heaven (Acts 7:55,56). David Brown expounds the significance of this:

The death of an individual is, for all practical purposes, the coming of Christ to that individual. It is his summons to appear before the judgment seat of Christ. It is for him the close of time, and the opening of an unchanging eternity, as truly the second advent will be to mankind at large.³⁸

For some this call to judgment will be startling. To the self-satisfied rich man, God says, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee," (12:20). Even for others that live out 70 or 80 years (Ps. 90:10), to the one that walks in darkness (Jn. 3:19-20,36), this meeting with their Maker upon death will be equally as startling and unexpected. But to the Christian, the day will not overtake them as a thief (1 Th. 5:4). For the great majority of people in history it is this coming with which they ought to be concerned with. Christ's coming at an individual's death may be the primary sense in Luke 12:36-48 and the secondary sense in Matt 24:42-51.

³⁸ Boettner, *Millennium*, 253.

(2) Of more direct reference, especially in 1 Thessalonians 5 and Phil. 4:5, is that we are to live with any eye to the Final Judgment at the second coming of Christ, that is, before the face of God. The eschatological language in these chapters is primarily that of fore-shortening and compression. It puts the comparative greatness and certainty of that event right up against our own existential experience. We must consciously consider how each of our actions will fare in light of the Last Day. It is not long before we stand before Him to give an account of every idle word (Matt 12:36). As Jonathan Edwards is so noted for emphasizing, we must live as if we were standing at the judgment looking back upon our life.

(3) It must be remembered that Christ's final coming when He brings with Him full deliverance from sin and the restoration of all things, was also the hope of Old Testament believers who in no way thought it was imminent or that they would live to see it (Heb. 11:10,13-16,35,39). It was said of Abraham that he "rejoiced to see my day, and saw it, and was glad," (Jn. 8:56, see also 1 Pet. 1:10-11). Boettner quotes Dr. Craig to this effect:

It is the hope not only of the saints on earth but also of all those who in the ages past have entered into their rest. It is the hope, therefore, of Abraham and Isaiah and Paul no less than of those of us who still labor on the earth.³⁹

Thus, watching for Christ's coming does not have to do with living in the last generation or even thinking that Christ may come at any moment.

O.T. Allis expresses how it is possible to watch for, to wait and long for something that is far off:

"A mother may live in the constant, ever present hope and expectation of seeing her absent boy, even when she knows that he is on the other side of the globe. Intensity of affection disregards time and distance. Seven years was a long time for Jacob to serve

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 262.

Rachel... Yet the years seemed to him like a few days for the love he had for her... The interest men take in an objective, the effort they are willing to make to attain it, does not depend on its nearness nearly so much as on its greatness, its desirability, and the probability or certainty of its ultimate achievement."⁴⁰

The coming of Christ will continue to be our hope after we die. The saints under the throne of God in heaven cry out "with a loud voice, saying, 'How long O Lord, holy and true, dost Thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?'" (Rev. 6:10) Dr. Craig explains:

Assuming that we die before the final return of our Lord, we will continue to long for it until it actually takes place. That is to say, all the saints, whether they are in heaven or on earth, are looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. And the reason for this is to be found in the fact that the saints do not attain their full blessedness until the Second Advent.⁴¹

While the intermediate state is much better than life on earth, it is only a waiting place, a down payment of the renovated new heavens and new earth to come at the *parousia*. Only at that time will it be said in all its fullness, "Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world," (Mt. 25:34).

Conclusion

The preceding examination and explanation of the 'nearness' texts in the New Testament has brought to light the following factors: The *parousia* (coming) will be largely unexpected to the last generation, watching is primarily ethical and covenantal language is being used with respect to the whole church. Scripture also gives numerous other reasons than the coming of Christ for why

⁴⁰ O.T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945), 169, as quoted in Gentry, *Dominion*, 437.

⁴¹ Boettner, *Millennium*, 262.

persons ought to live righteously. If we do not expect Jesus to come back within our lifetime it should not make us any less watchful of His approaching second coming. An any-moment coming also does not actually spur one's zeal for greater faithfulness and good works: If imminence language in the New Testament can allow for two thousand years before the second advent, then there is no reason to preclude it from allowing ten thousand years.⁴² An any-moment coming of Christ is, paradoxically, a good reason to believe that it won't happen any time soon. Kenneth Gentry concludes, "though it is true that we should eagerly long for the Return of Christ, it is neither true that this entails its imminence nor that this is the only genuine spur to diligence."⁴³ He humorously observes that in so far as people pay life insurance premiums and lay up money for retirement, they are actually putting money on the fact that Christ's return is not imminent.⁴⁴

These factors taken together form an interpretive framework that fully satisfies the language, context and intent of all the 'imminent' passages in the New Testament, while allowing for a robust postmillennialism. The original objection that an imminent return of Christ disproves postmillennialism has been sufficiently answered, refuted and turned on the opponents. To conclude with Davis, "the sense of the immanency of the *parousia* in the New Testament, then, is fundamentally Christological and existential rather than chronological and calendrical in nature."⁴⁵ Why do postmillennialists believe that Christ's coming is still afar off? It is because scripture says that Christ "must reign till he has put all enemies under his feet," (1 Cor. 15:25). We still have not seen the day when "all kings shall fall down before Him: all nations shall serve Him," (Ps. 72:11).

⁴² See Mathison, *Postmillennialism*, 205.

⁴³ Gentry, *Dominion*, 438.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Davis, *The Victory*, 72.

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