



Dear EFCA Family,

The EFCA Spiritual Heritage Committee is working on a 2nd edition of *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America*.

One of the reasons for this revision is the Conference decision made in June 2019 to edit Article 9, removing the term “premillennial” and replacing it with “glorious.” With this change, we affirm the following: “We believe in the personal, bodily and glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Since Article 9 consists of a change to our Statement of Faith, and since that is the most significant change in this 2nd edition, we provide this revised chapter on Article 9 now, prior to the release of the complete book. The final draft of Article 9 was written by the Spiritual Heritage Committee and vetted by numerous individuals representing various ministries in the EFCA. This was the process followed for the initial publication of *Evangelical Convictions*, and it will also be followed with the completed 2nd edition.

The complete 2nd edition of *Evangelical Convictions* will be released later this year, Lord willing. We pray for the fruitful use of this “theological exposition” on “Christ’s Return,” and we ask for your prayer for the completion of the 2nd edition of *Evangelical Convictions*.

For the Sake of Christ and the Strengthening of the Church,
Spiritual Heritage Committee

Evangelical Convictions

A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical
Free Church of America, 2nd ed.

Article 9

CHRIST'S RETURN



9. We believe in the personal, bodily and glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ, at a time known only to God, demands constant expectancy and, as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.

*God's gospel will be brought to fulfillment
by the Lord Himself at the end of this age.*

Human beings ordinarily experience the world in three dimensions. With two eyes operating simultaneously and through the subtle effects of light and shadow and our knowledge of the relative sizes of objects, we can distinguish between near and far. Our sense of depth perception enriches our experience of life, much as a hologram enhances a two-dimensional photograph. Our lives are impoverished without this fullness of perception.

The three dimensions we experience in *space* remind us of the three dimensions we experience in *time*. We live, of course, only in the immediacy of the present, but we also remember the past and anticipate the future. The failure to learn from the past and the inability to prepare for the future are decided deficiencies that hinder healthy living. This temporal depth perception is an essential quality that must be developed if we are to live as God intended in this world, for a holistic understanding of the gospel requires an appreciation of its three temporal dimensions.

God's gospel has been accomplished in the *past*. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has acted to save us. Through that sacrificial death of Christ on the cross our sins have been taken away. We have been justified by God's grace, we *have been* saved, and we are no longer subject to the penalty of sin.

Now, in the *present*, that gospel is applied to our lives by the work of the Holy Spirit. Through the new birth, the Spirit unites us to Christ and to the new community called the

church, and he empowers us to live in a new way. We are being sanctified by God's Spirit; we *are being* saved, as we are progressively set free from the power of sin.

But God's gospel also has a *future* dimension, for God's saving purpose is not yet complete. Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, and his resurrection is but the first fruits of what is to come. Christ has been seated at the right hand of the Father, but his authority is not yet recognized by all. We still live in a fallen world, and sin and evil abound. We are still plagued by the weakness of our mortal bodies, and we have not yet been glorified with Christ in the new heaven and the new earth. But the gospel declares that in the future we *will be* saved by God's power when we are delivered from even the presence of sin.

The Bible promises us that God's gospel—his gracious purpose to redeem a people for himself in Jesus Christ—will be brought to fulfillment by the Lord himself at the end of the age when Jesus Christ returns to this earth in glory.

I. The Return of Jesus Christ

In Acts 1, Luke tells us that after his resurrection Jesus showed himself to his disciples "and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). Then at the end of that period, the disciples were together on the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem, and Jesus "was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight" (v. 9).

In this reserved and unadorned account, free from the wild extravagance of legend or tradition, we cannot be sure exactly what the disciples saw. Though Jesus was lifted up before their eyes, a cloud hid him from their sight. The cloud throughout Scripture not

only symbolizes the powerful presence of God¹ but also the movement of God, for "the Lord rides on a swift cloud" (Isa. 19:1), and the clouds are "his chariot" (Ps. 104:3). In Daniel 7, the Son of Man rode the clouds as he approached the throne of God (Dan. 7:13). Here the disciples receive a visible representation of a spiritual reality—this Jesus whom they had known and loved was taken up into the very presence of God to be seated at his right hand.

The immediate effect of this event on the disciples was confusion, as they were left wondering if they would ever see Jesus again. This response elicited a mild rebuke from the angelic figures beside them: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go" (Acts 1:11). Jesus would come back to them gloriously riding on the clouds.

The disciples ought to have known this, for Jesus himself had spoken of it. In his Olivet Discourse² Jesus taught that in the last days there would be a time of great distress. "Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other" (Matt. 24:30-31). Again, in Matthew 25:31 Jesus had said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne," judging the nations. Jesus Christ who rose from the dead and ascended to his Father to sit at his right hand would come again in great power and glory.

¹Cf. e.g., Exod. 16:10; 19:9; 24:16, and, in the New Testament, Matt. 17:5.

²See Matt. 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21.

This conviction became a critical element of apostolic instruction. Paul is most explicit. He assures the Thessalonians who were suffering for their faith that God is just and that justice would be done. "This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels" (2 Thess. 1:7). And he assures them also that they need not worry about those believers who have already died, for they will not miss out on this glorious event.

According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever (1 Thess. 4:15-17).

"[O]ur citizenship is in heaven," Paul writes. "And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20). "We wait for this blessed hope: the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).³

Peter also speaks of that day when "Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Pet. 1:7,13; 4:13) and when "the Chief Shepherd appears" (5:4), and on that day God's people will receive a crown of glory.⁴ James urges patience "until the Lord's coming" (James 5:7-8). In his first epistle John instructs, "And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming" (1 John 2:28), with the encouragement that "when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (3:2). The Revelation of John is centered on this glorious reality, as Jesus

³In Paul, cf. also Rom. 8:22-24; 1 Cor. 1:7; 15:23; 16:22; Gal. 5:5; Eph. 4:30; Phil. 1:6, 20; 2:16; Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 1:9-10; 2:1-12; 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:1.

⁴Cf. also Peter's words in Acts 3:20-21 and his reference to the "coming of the day of the Lord" in 2 Pet. 1:16; 3:12.

declares, "Look, I am coming soon!" (Rev. 22:7,12).⁵ And in Hebrews we read, "Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Heb. 9:28). The return of Jesus Christ was a central conviction of the apostles. Jesus Christ is coming again!

II. The Nature of Christ's Return:

A. A Personal Return

How should we conceive of this future coming of Christ? First, we affirm that it will be personal. Paul affirms that "*the Lord himself* will come down from heaven" (1 Thess. 4:16). This is not the coming of a spiritual force, or an idea, or a new form of government or a new way of life. The Bible affirms the coming of Jesus Christ himself—"this same Jesus . . . will come back" (Acts 1:11). Just as surely as he once came to us as a carpenter,⁶ so he himself will come again as a king.

B. A Bodily Return

Jesus will come again personally, and he will come again bodily. The angels told the disciples on the day of Jesus' ascension, "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts. 1:11). As he ascended in his glorified resurrection body, so he will return in that same glorified body. We will see him, and we will become like him, in a bodily existence fit for the new heaven and the new earth (Phil. 3:20-21).

⁵In John's Gospel, cf. John 21:22.

⁶This is the common translation of the Greek *tektôn* (Mk. 6:3), which could refer more broadly to a builder skilled in wood, stone, or even metal.

Some through history have conceived of Christ's return in only spiritual terms. The Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, maintain that Christ came to begin his reign over the earth on October 1, 1914. But this conception of the second coming of Christ has little in common with what the Bible describes. We believe that Jesus will come bodily for all to see, as visible as lightning that flashes across the sky (cf. Matt. 24:27).

C. A Glorious Return

Third, we affirm that Jesus will come gloriously: "We wait for this blessed hope: the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). Where once Jesus came in the humility of a baby in a manger, he will return in majesty and glory as King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16). As the Risen Lord, Jesus has already entered into the glory of his heavenly Father (Heb. 2:9; 1 Pet. 1:21; Rev. 5:12).

This glory was previewed to a few of the disciples when on the mount of transfiguration, "His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light" (Matt. 17:2). It was further revealed to John on the island of Patmos when, on the Lord's Day, he was in the Spirit and saw

someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance (Rev. 1:13-16).

When Christ returns, this glorious and exalted status will be made known to all (cf. 2 Thess. 1:6-10).

Herein lies the great mystery of the gospel. Israel's promised Messiah did not first come into this world as a powerful, conquering hero, at least not as we conceive of such things. Even in his earthly life he was a king, but he chose to reign not from a royal throne but from a cross.⁷ He assumed the role of a suffering servant, described by the prophet Isaiah as one who "had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (53:2-3). Such a role did not match Jewish expectations, as evidenced so clearly in Peter's response to Jesus' declaration of his own death: "Never, Lord! . . . This shall never happen to you!" (Matt. 16:22). No wonder Paul's message of "Christ crucified" was a stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:23). But it was Jesus himself who helped his disciples to see—"Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (Luke 24:26; cf. 1 Pet. 1:11).

For now, we proclaim Christ as Lord, but a Lord whose glory is known only by faith. We are in the awkward position of being called to be ambassadors of a disputed king, whose sovereignty is itself in question, leaving us vulnerable and without worldly legitimation.⁸ But Christ's promise is that he will return to vindicate himself and his people before the watching world: "Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the

⁷Note not only the inscription placed above him on the cross ("This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" [Matt. 27:37]), but the taunts of the soldiers (Matt. 27:29) and of the passersby (Matt. 27:42; cf. also John 19:21-22).

⁸Cf. Richard Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry, rev. ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 69. The temptation, Neuhaus suggests, is one of relieving the awkwardness of our position by accepting a lesser authority from another kingdom. In other words, we are tempted to use some power of this age—the power of money, or of academic reputation or of political clout—to make the other members at the world's court listen to us rather than faithfully relying on the validation of Christ as our Lord and King.

clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other." (Matt. 24:30-31). Until then, we are to be faithful, fearlessly confessing his name, for Jesus has warned, "Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" (Luke 9:26).

In this world we may suffer (indeed, we should expect no less [cf. e.g., John 16:33; Phil. 1:29]), but we can be assured that, as Paul writes, "we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Rom. 8:17). Thus, such suffering ought not to be a cause for sorrow but for joy, as Peter urges: "But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet. 4:13). "When Christ, who is your life, appears," Paul declares, "then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col. 3:4; cf. Rom. 8:18; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 John 3:2).

This glorious return of Christ will manifest two aspects of his role: he will come as King and as Judge.

1. Christ Will Come as King

A crucified Messiah seemed a scandalous contradiction to the Jews of Jesus' day (1 Cor. 1:23). To the Romans it was foolishness. But the first Christians boldly declared that this one who had been nailed to a Roman cross was indeed Lord and King. Jesus was Israel's promised Messiah, King David's greater Son who would assume his royal throne (cf. Matt. 1:1; 22:41-46; Luke 1:31-33; Rom. 1:3; 2 Tim. 2:8; Rev. 5:5). Opinions vary on the extent (if at all) Jesus assumed that role during his earthly lifetime, but all are

agreed that when he returns in glory he will establish his kingdom fully and be recognized by all as "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Phil. 2:11; Rev. 19:16). "When the Son of Man comes in his glory," Jesus said, "and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne" (Matt. 25:31). This Jesus, who has ascended to the right hand of the Father and is even now sharing his rule (cf. e.g., Matt. 28:18; Heb. 2:8), will come in glory and vanquish all his enemies, including even death itself (Heb. 10:13; 1 Cor. 15:25). Then God's saving purpose in the gospel will be brought to fulfillment, and the will of God will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Indeed, heaven and earth will become one, and God's righteous kingdom will be fully realized when the One who was crucified as "King of the Jews" will be crowned with glory as Lord of all (Rev. 11:15).

a. Premillennialism⁹

Though all are agreed that Christ's kingdom will be brought to fulfillment, opinions differ regarding the road that leads there. Rather than being a single great event which ushers in the new heaven and the new earth, many believe, principally on the basis of the teaching of Revelation 20:1-10,¹⁰ that Christ's return first inaugurates an "intermediate kingdom" between the present age and the eternal state, a kingdom in which Christ's

⁹ More space will be given to premillennialism than to other eschatological positions because of the variations within premillennialism.

¹⁰In the New Testament, 1 Cor. 15:20-28 is also cited as a passage that at least suggests an intermediate kingdom of Christ. Those operating within a Dispensationalist framework (see further below) see numerous passages in the Old Testament that point to the millennium. However, there is no consensus among premillennialists whether certain Old Testament prophecies (e.g. Ps. 72:8-14; Isa. 11:6-9; Zech. 14:5-17) refer to the church age, to the millennium or to the new heaven and the new earth. Nor is there a settled view on whether passages such as Ezek. 40-48 require a literal fulfillment in some future Jewish kingdom or were intended by their authors to be understood to refer to real future events but in a symbolic sense.

identity as Lord and King will be publicly vindicated on earth.¹¹ This period of great earthly blessedness under the rule of Christ is known as the millennium,¹² and since, in this view, Christ will return *before* this kingdom is realized, his return is referred to as *pre-millennial*.¹³

According to premillennialists, events surrounding the millennial kingdom finalize the defeat of the dragon, "that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan" (Rev. 20:2), a battle which began in the Garden of Eden. One can understand this millennial kingdom as a restoration of God's good creation. Jesus, as the second Adam, fulfills the priestly and regal dimensions of the first Adam's God-given role in creation (found in Gen. 1:26-27; 2:15-17), and his people will share with him in this role as kings and priests (cf. Rev. 20:6). Thus, the millennial kingdom is the penultimate fulfillment of God's promise of blessing to his people in the context of this fallen world, while the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven (Rev. 21:2) is the ultimate realization of that promise in the context of the fully transformed cosmos when the distinction between heaven and earth will be no more and God will fully dwell with his people.

Some premillennialists understand this millennial reign of Christ not so much in terms of a restoration of Eden but as a restoration of Israel. This view, associated particularly with a theological system known as Dispensationalism,¹⁴ insists on a strict

¹¹As a transition it is in some ways continuous with and different from both the present age and the eternal state. Conceptions of this millennial kingdom often differ on whether it is more like our present experience or more like that glorious (and unimaginable) future reality.

¹²Revelation 20:1-10 speaks of a period of "a thousand years," but numbers are often used symbolically in this type of literature in general and in the Book of Revelation in particular. (See especially the use of the numbers 4, 7, 10 and 12 [and numbers derived from them] in the book.) Therefore, many interpret this "thousand years" simply as an extended period of time.

¹³Some proponents of this view in the early church include Papias, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus.

¹⁴This term was coined for this view based on the importance given by it to the various ways God has ordered his relationship to human beings, known as "dispensations." It tends to stress the discontinuity

distinction between Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament. Consequently, Dispensationalists believe that the promises to the nation of Israel are still in effect and will be fulfilled on earth in some visible and tangible way. The millennial kingdom, then, is the sphere in which national Israel is reconstituted and God's promises of blessing to Israel are realized.

This Dispensational view also entails that before the institution of this Jewish kingdom, the Lord will take his (largely) Gentile church out of this world before a period of great tribulation lasting seven years in which God's wrath will be poured out. This exodus will occur when Christ comes from heaven to "rapture"¹⁵ his church into heaven (see 1 Thess. 4:13-18), before returning in glory with them at the end of this tribulational period to inaugurate his millennial kingdom. This view is referred to as "pre-tribulational premillennialism," and it has been popular in Free Church history, and was dominant at the time of the merger in 1950, but is less so today.

The more traditional form of premillennialism, known as "historic premillennialism" (which has become increasingly common in the Free Church in recent years), holds that the promises to Israel may be fulfilled in Christ, in the church, in the millennium, or in the new heaven and the new earth. The millennium will be focused on the church, not on

between the Old and New Testaments, emphasizing the continuing significance of the nation of Israel. A contrasting viewpoint highlighting the continuity of the two Testaments is often referred to as Covenant (or "Federal") theology, which affirms the church as existing throughout redemptive history. Covenant theology understands God's relationship with humanity through the lens of various covenants which transcend the various dispensations of history. These covenants are most commonly designated as the covenant of works made with Adam, the covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son, and the covenant of grace made with the elect. In recent years two mediating positions have emerged from these two opposing poles: Progressive Dispensationalism and Progressive Covenantalism. It is important to note that all these views include both covenants and dispensations. The issue is which one is in the foreground as the organizing strategy for reading the whole Bible and which one is in the background.

¹⁵This term comes from the Latin translation of 1 Thess. 4:17, where Paul says that believers who are still alive will be "caught up" (*rapiemur*) in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

Israel. Consequently, historic premillennialists see the coming of Christ not in two stages but as one great event. According to this view, the "rapture" referred to in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 in which believers will "meet the Lord in the air" echoes a royal welcome in which those visited by a king would go out to meet him as a form of honorific greeting.¹⁶ There will be a time of tribulation on earth, but Christ will not come until *after* this has been completed.¹⁷

The premillennial position, in its various forms, has often been associated with a heightened sense of eschatological expectation, and this has been seen as one of its strengths. An urgency regarding the coming of Christ has been a driving force for evangelism and missions. Further, this position gives strong emphasis to the "earthly" dimensions of God's saving purpose, in that Christ's rule will be manifest, in some sense, in the present world order. In addition, it deals with John's statements about a "thousand-year reign of Christ" in Revelation 20 in an apparently straightforward manner, seeing the coming of Christ in chapter 19, the millennial reign in chapter 20, and the realization of the new heaven and the new earth in chapters 21-22 as temporally sequential. But the premillennial view is not without its weaknesses. Some would assert that the pessimism of the premillennial view in regard to future times of trial and tribulations before Christ's coming can lead to a diminishment of social concern. According to this view, things will

¹⁶The expression used in this verse (*eis apantêsin*) is also used of the virgins going out to meet the bridegroom in Matt. 25:6 and of the believers going out to meet Paul as he was about to arrive in Rome (Acts 28:15).

¹⁷Historic premillennialism is thus classified as "post-tribulational." Other views related to the period of the tribulation include "mid-tribulationalism," which holds that Christ will return in the middle of the seven-year period of tribulation referred to in Revelation, and "pre-wrath," which holds that Christ will return some time after the mid-point but before the end of the tribulation. Since these views also hold to a two-stage return of Christ, they should be considered as variations of the Dispensational pre-tribulational view.

continue to get worse and worse. Thus, there is little hope for social improvement and our only goal ought to be to rescue souls from future judgment.

b. Postmillennialism

Premillennialism is distinguished from two other views regarding this messianic kingdom. Some contend that through the preaching of the gospel around the world and the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in conversion, a large proportion of the world's population will become believers in Christ. Moral conditions in the world will dramatically improve as the gospel transforms individuals, families, churches, communities and cultures.¹⁸ Because Christ will return only *after* this time of earthly blessing, this view is called post-millennialism. This hope has gripped many during times of great revival, including the renowned Evangelical pastor-theologian Jonathan Edwards in the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century.

Postmillennialism emphasizes the power of the gospel in the world to change lives and even societies. Since Jesus has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18), we should expect to see his kingdom advance in this world. Jesus' parables comparing the kingdom of heaven to a small mustard seed that grows into a large tree in which the birds build their nests and to a small amount of yeast that leavens the whole lump of dough (Matt. 13:31-33) are thought to lend support to the prospect of an enormous impact of the gospel in the world. The prophetic vision will be fulfilled in this

¹⁸A theologically liberal version of this view asserts that this transformation will take place simply through political and social efforts promoting social justice (the so-called "social gospel"). Evangelical proponents of postmillennialism would not agree with this humanistic version and would ascribe this transformation to God's power and grace at work in the world. Also, they would not deny that a period of great tribulation may precede Christ's glorious coming.

age when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9; Hab. 2:14).

This optimistic view of the prospering of the gospel in the world has been seen as a great motivation for evangelistic ministry, fueling hope for missionary success. At the same time, this position has been criticized for fostering a naïve triumphalism, believing that the church can somehow conquer the world while ignoring the strong biblical warnings about the times of tribulation (the "birth pains of the Messiah" [Matt. 24:8]) that will surely come before Christ returns. Most postmillennialists, however, believe that there will be a final outbreak of evil before the coming of Christ. At that time, Satan will foment a global rebellion against Christ and his church, but it will be finally and fully overcome as Christ prevails.

c. Amillennialism

A third view of this earthly kingdom, and the most common throughout the history of the church, understands this rule of Christ as operative during the present age, for he is even now at the right hand of the Father and has been given all authority in heaven and earth (cf. Matt. 28:18). When Christ returns he will immediately usher in the new heaven and the new earth. Since no intermediate millennial kingdom of Christ is posited, this view is commonly referred to as a-millennialism,¹⁹ though some adherents prefer the term "inaugurated millennialism," for they believe that the millennial rule of Christ has already begun.²⁰ They interpret the Book of Revelation as a series of overlapping and

¹⁹The "a" represents the negative prefix in Greek.

²⁰This view necessarily entails a very different conception of what is meant by the "millennium."

recapitulating cycles, with the seals, trumpets and bowls all recounting basically the same reality from different perspectives and all ending with the culmination of Christ's return at the end of the age. They consider the binding of Satan and Christ's millennial kingdom (Rev. 20:1-10) as yet another recapitulation describing the present age of the church.

In addition, amillennialists contend that elsewhere in the New Testament the great events that signal the transition from "this age" to "the age to come"—the last trumpet signaling the defeat of death (1 Cor. 15:50-57), the creation set free from its bondage to decay (Rom. 8:18-21), the opportunity to receive the gospel in faith (Matt. 24:14), and the introduction of the new heaven and the new earth (2 Pet. 3:10-13)—all occur at the glorious coming of Christ and not after a millennial age.

Amillennialism has the strength of putting the eschatological emphasis on what seems to be the focus of the New Testament teaching, namely, the triumphant return of Christ (and not an intermediate earthly kingdom) as the climax of the Christian hope. Further, many consider basing a doctrine of an earthly millennium primarily on a single New Testament passage from one of the most difficult to interpret New Testament books (Rev. 20:1-10) to be a shaky foundation, which points away from premillennialism toward amillennialism. However, amillennialism has been criticized for its failure to deal adequately with Rev. 20:1-10 and its lack of concern for the "earthly" aspects of God's redeeming work, putting the stress on a spiritual heaven divorced from this created order as the climax of salvation. More recent work among Evangelical amillennialists has given new emphasis to the completion of God's purposes for creation in the "new heaven and the new earth" where Christ's glorious kingdom will be fully established.²¹

²¹ Consider this comment from the amillennialist Anthony Hoekema: "All too often, unfortunately, amillennial exegetes fail to keep biblical teaching on the new earth in mind when interpreting Old Testament prophecy. It is an impoverishment of the meaning of these passages to make them apply only to the church or to

A historical survey reveals that all three of these eschatological views have been held in the church, even within the Evangelical tradition.²² Furthermore, the millennial issue has not been defined in any major ecclesiastical creed or confessional statement.²³ This reticence reflects the view of Justin Martyr, one of the early Christian apologists writing in the mid-second century. Justin himself espoused a belief in the millennial reign of Christ on earth, but he did not make this position a criterion for orthodoxy, conceding that "many who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise."²⁴ A twentieth-century leader in the Evangelical Free Church, Kenneth Kantzer, voiced the same sentiment:

Some doctrines—the Trinity and the Incarnation, for example—are more integrally related to the person of Christ or to the gospel. Yet other doctrines, such as baptism or the nature of the elect, may be very important, but do not demand universal allegiance. One can possess an enduring and consistent Christian faith and differ with another believer over this kind of doctrine. Explanations about the second coming of Christ fit this description. It is an important slice of biblical theology, but it does not require a single interpretation among Christians.²⁵

heaven. But it is also an impoverishment to make them refer to a thousand-year period preceding the final state. They must be understood as inspired descriptions of the glorious new earth God is preparing for his people" (*The Bible and the Future* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979], pp.205-206).

²² During the history of the church, various millennial views have been present but with varying degrees of emphasis or popularity. Premillennialism had relatively more prominence in the second and third centuries, amillennialism gained greater emphasis from the fourth century onward, while postmillennialism received more support during the periods of revival in the eighteenth century.

²³ Premillennialism was included in the 1950 and 2008 versions of the EFCA Statement of Faith, but it was not included in the earlier 1912 Norwegian-Danish Statement of Faith: "We believe that Jesus Christ who ascended into heaven, shall come again in great power and glory."

²⁴ *Dialogue with Trypho*, LXXX.

²⁵ "Our Future Hope: Eschatology and Its Role in the Church" [Christianity Today Institute], *Christianity Today* 31/2 [February, 1987], p. 1-1-14-1).

In light of our distinctive ethos in the EFCA of uniting around the central doctrines of the faith, we chose in 2019 to eliminate premillennialism as a required doctrinal position within our movement. We welcome those with various positions on this issue who also affirm the entire truthfulness of Scripture and share our central theological convictions. We affirm simply and confidently that Christ will bring his kingdom to fulfillment when he comes personally, bodily, and in glory.²⁶

2. Christ Will Come as Judge²⁷

Christ's glorious return will be marked by an angelic escort when he comes as a conquering King, and when he comes, he will also act as Judge. This Messianic judgment was clearly anticipated by John the Baptist who preached a message of repentance to Israel in preparation for the coming of the Lord: "The axe is already at the root of the trees," he proclaimed, "and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt. 3:10). John proclaimed the imminent fulfillment of God's promise to bring justice to his people, rescuing them from their enemies through divine judgment. And when Jesus appeared, John declared that he was that One who was to come—the One whose "winnowing fork is in his hand" ready to clear the threshing floor, "gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:12).

²⁶We therefore deny a "hyper-preterist" position (the word "preterist" refers to a past action or state) which holds that Christ "returned" in A.D. 70 and that there is no future bodily coming of Christ in glory at the end of the age.

²⁷On the broader theme of the divine judgment, see Article 10, sec. II.B.

But that day of righteous judgment was delayed. John himself was perplexed as he sat in jail, facing execution, having been arrested by the wicked Herod Antipas. Where is the judgment that brings righteousness and peace? Hence, John's question sent from prison to Jesus: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matt. 11:3).

Jesus answers John indirectly, but affirmatively: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me" (Matt. 11:4-6). These words, describing what was happening in Jesus' ministry, reflect the promise of the prophets as they looked forward to the coming of the kingdom of God (Isa. 29:18; 35:5; 61:6).

Yet each of those Old Testament passages speaks of another aspect of the coming kingdom which Jesus does not include—the act of judgment (cf. Isa. 29:20; 35:4; 61:2). In Jesus' ministry, we see the unfolding of "the year of the LORD's favor" (Isa. 61:2a) but without "the day of vengeance of our God" (Isa. 61:2b). In other words, the salvation of God's people has come in Jesus' ministry, but the judgment of the wicked has not yet come. This is part of the mystery of the kingdom which provoked John's question.

Jesus spoke of this mystery in his parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:24-30). For now, the weeds grow with the wheat, and only at the harvest would they be gathered and burned. In his explanation, Jesus makes the point: "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and

gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matt. 13:40-43). Judgment will come, but not yet—not until the Son of Man comes in his glory, with the delay in his coming providing an opportunity for repentance (Lk. 13:1-5; 2 Pet. 3:1-10).

Jesus' coming in glory will bring to completion the future promised by the prophets and by John. The Messiah will be revealed as King and Judge (2 Tim. 4:1). This is stated most clearly by Jesus himself: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matt. 25:31-32). Jesus has been given this authority by his Father (John 5:22,27), for, in the words of Paul, "[God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31; also 10:42; 2 Cor. 5:10).

In this present age, Jesus' divine identity is obscured, his royal sovereignty is denied, and his righteous will is defied. The gospel's power is shrouded in mystery. However, the promise of God's Word is that one day his glory will be made known. He will establish his authority as King of kings with his angelic attendants, and he will bring God's judgment to bear in this fallen world. Until then, we live in faith and wait in expectant hope for "the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).

III. The Time of Christ's Return

Speculation about the time of the return of Christ has been a constant temptation in the life of the church. Thus far, no prediction has proved true. The Bible warns us against such speculation in the clearest terms.

A. The Time of Christ's Return Is Known Only to God

Jesus spoke of signs of the end, including earthquakes, famine, political upheaval, false messiahs, persecution amid world-wide gospel preaching, and even the fall of Jerusalem (Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21), but none of these can be used to pinpoint a particular moment in history when the end will come. "You do not know on what day your Lord will come," he told his disciples (Matt. 24:42). In fact, "about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matt. 24:36; cf. 1 Tim. 6:14-15). Speculation is fruitless, and it can be dangerous. Jesus warned against false prophets who would come and deceive many concerning his coming (Matt. 24:4,11,24). He will come "like a thief in the night," Paul writes (1 Thess. 5:2; also 2 Pet. 3:10).

B. Christ's Return Demands Constant Expectancy

This uncertainty regarding the time of Christ's return demands that the proper attitude toward his coming is one of constant expectancy. "Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" (Matt. 24:42). Jesus will come like a thief in the night, so we are not to be caught sleeping, but should be alert and self-

controlled (1 Thess. 5:6; Rom. 13:11-14; 2 Pet. 3:10-12; Rev. 3:3). Jesus urged his followers to be faithful servants, vigilant in their duty. "So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Matt. 24:44; Luke 12:40). The question remains: when he comes, will our Lord find us living in faith (Luke 18:8)?

The conviction that Jesus Christ could return at any time was compelling to many early Free Church leaders in this country. They believed the Lord's coming was imminent and that this return was the next great event to transpire in God's plan of salvation. Because the word "imminent" became associated with a particular theological position (the pre-tribulational coming of Christ) that is not required in the EFCA, we chose in the Statement revised in 2008 to express this concern in other terms. Echoing the biblical language, we are to be constantly expectant.

But does this demand for constant expectancy imply that there can be no "signs" of Christ's coming? Some contend that if any signs must occur before Christ's return or that if Christ's coming will take place only after a defined period of intense tribulation, the biblical call to vigilance is undermined. It appears to many, however, that the Bible is not clear on this point. Despite the call to constant vigilance, when Jesus' disciples asked him about the time of his coming, he spoke at some length of various things that must happen first, including the gospel being "preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations" (cf. Matt. 24:14,33-34). The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, but Paul teaches the Thessalonians that "you, brothers and sisters, are not in the darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief" (1 Thess. 5:4). In his second letter to them, he appears to go even farther: "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed" (2 Thess. 2:3).

We should concede that it is possible that some signs must first take place before Christ returns (including a time of great tribulation), but we must also humbly acknowledge that we may not be able to discern those signs clearly enough to determine contemporaneously whether they have, in fact, already taken place.²⁸ Our best course is to assert what the Bible most clearly affirms: only the Father knows the time of the Son's return, and until he comes we must maintain constant expectancy. We are called to live as "sons of the light and sons of the day" (1 Thess. 5:5), with constant moral vigilance and enduring faith and hope.

IV. The Effect of Christ's Return:

A. Our Blessed Hope

The first Christians were inspired by an eager expectation—the Lord Jesus Christ is coming back! "Our citizenship is in heaven," Paul writes, "And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20). He declares to Titus, "[W]e wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). John in his first epistle echoes that eager hope: "Dear children, this is the last hour; . . . we know that when he appears, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is" (2:18; 3:2). In almost the last words of the New Testament, the risen Jesus declares, "I am coming soon!" This declaration evokes the response, "Amen. Come Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20).

²⁸For example, how can we determine whether the gospel has indeed been preached to all nations (cf. Matt. 24:14)?

These Christians were waiting for the coming of their Lord Jesus, and they expected him to return soon. Paul seems to expect it within his own lifetime when he tells the Thessalonians that "we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep" (1 Thess. 4:15). "The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here" (Rom. 13:11-12). James expresses this expectation: "Be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near" (James 5:8). Peter, too, states it clearly, "The end of all things is near" (1 Pet. 4:7).

Were they mistaken in their belief in the "nearness" of the coming of Christ? Even during the apostolic age, scoffers were asking, "Where is this 'coming' he promised?" (2 Pet. 3:4). After two thousand years can we still have the same expectation, the same hope?

We can and we must. Theirs was an eager expectation, which should be shared by every generation of believers. As we have already seen, alongside the New Testament statements about the nearness of Jesus' coming are those which speak of or presuppose a delay or which declare the time of his coming as uncertain and even unknowable. The "nearness" of his coming speaks of the possibility of it taking place soon. In that sense, the Lord's coming was near then, and it is near now, for we do not know when it will be.

Further, our perception of time is limited. Peter reminds us, "And do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day" (2 Pet. 3:8). There is a purpose in the delay (if we may even call it a delay), for through it the Lord is testing our faithfulness and allowing the opportunity for salvation. "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.

Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

In the meantime, we are sustained by the Lord's great and precious promises (2 Pet. 1:4). More than that, Paul speaks of the down payment that has already been made, the seal of the Holy Spirit who now lives within our hearts, and who guarantees that we shall receive what God has promised to his people (Eph. 1:14). As we await the "not yet," we enjoy the "already."

The early Christians spoke of Christ's second coming as if it were just around the corner, and so should we, as we sing,

The strife will not be long;
This day the noise of battle,
The next the victor's song.²⁹

B. A Motivation for the Believer

It is sometimes said such an emphasis on the coming of Christ has a detrimental effect on the life of Christians. The admonition to "be watchful" is understood as mere star-gazing. People become so busy looking up to the heavens for Jesus to return that they are no earthly good.³⁰ Life on this side of Christ's coming becomes almost frivolous and without significance.

Such an understanding could not be further from the truth. Being watchful does not mean that we should sit out on the porch like a lonely dog, pining away until our master

²⁹From the hymn "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus" by George Duffield, Jr. (1858).

³⁰It is sometimes argued that Paul's warnings against idleness in 2 Thess. 2:6-15 are directed against those who had taken this approach.

returns. Instead, we are to live with the certainty that Christ is coming, and when he does we will be held accountable for how we have lived. Jesus compared our situation to that of stewards responsible for the master's estate (Matt. 24:45-51) or to financial managers entrusted with the master's money (Matt. 25:14-30). We have a job to do, and when our Master returns, he will reward his servants for their faithfulness. He gave those who saw him taken up before their eyes the commission to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Living with a sense of expectancy of the coming of Christ ought not to draw us away from earthly responsibilities but make us more faithful to them. Lord Shaftesbury, a nineteenth-century English social reformer who worked tirelessly to improve conditions in the London slums, said near the end of his life, "I do not think that in the last forty years I have lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by the thought of our Lord's return."³¹ The coming of Christ ought to motivate the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission. "For what comes," wrote C. S. Lewis, "is judgment." Lewis continues:

Happy are those whom [the Lord] finds laboring in their vocation, whether we're merely going out to feed the pigs or laying good plans to deliver humanity a hundred years hence from some great evil. Perhaps the curtain *will* fall—those pigs will *never* in fact be fed, the great campaign against slavery or governmental tyranny will never in fact proceed to victory. No matter; you were at your post when the inspection came.³²

³¹Quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), p. 707.

³² C.S. Lewis, *The World's Last Night, And Other Essays* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1960), pp. 111, 112.

Regardless of how much time is left before our Lord returns, we must live each day with an eager hope to hear his words of commendation, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21). Blessed is that servant whose Master finds him living faithfully when he returns (Matt. 24:46).

"The night is nearly over; the day is almost here" (Rom. 13:12). We wait for the day when our Lord will come to fulfill all that has been promised by the prophets (cf. Acts 3:21), when Christ "will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Heb. 9:28). The gospel's promise of redemption will be fulfilled when Christ comes again in glory. This hope of the final consummation of what was begun in Jesus' resurrection from the dead is essential. As one writer put it, "Faith in Jesus, faith in his life, and his death, and his resurrection from the grave, without the expectation of his [return] is a cheque that is never cashed, a promise that is not made in earnest. A faith in Christ without the expectation of a [return] is like a flight of stairs that leads nowhere, but ends in the void."³³

Jesus Christ is coming again, and until then we must "continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming" (1 John 2:28). "We wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). So we pray together with the early Jewish Christians in words preserved in Aramaic, *marana tha*, which means "Come, Lord!" (1 Cor. 16:22).

³³Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith and the Consummation: Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (Eng. trans., London: Lutterworth, 1966), p. 396, cited in Stephen H. Travis, *I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 105.