

Essay #3:
**Eagerly Await the Savior
as You Look Forward to Christ's Return**

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Part I. The Two Eons.

The purpose of my essay is to ponder the approaching of the new eon of justice, holiness, and immortality. The signs and the very Advent of Christ itself falls under the wider biblical and theological category called the Last Things, or Eschatology. My theme as stated in the title deals with the signs of the approaching new eon of Christ, and the Christ's Second Advent in glory and power which is an essential basis for all Christian hope.

Quite often when speaking of the Second Advent of Christ, our reason ascribes these events only to a certain time in the future. Dr. Hermann Sasse writes in his *We Confess*, *“At the beginning of this century a complacent church regarded the Last Things as an element of the first Christian proclamation which more or less belonged to that first period, a form of the Gospel which was for us of only historical interest. Or, alternatively, it was thought of as something that might be of significance for the future, at the end of our lives, or at the end of the world, something we needed to study only in preparation for such an end. That there is for the church no more vitally relevant doctrine than that of the Last Things was brought home to Christians of Europe by all they were called to endure.”*¹

It is not merely by chance that Christ Himself, when speaking of His second coming, positions and weaves together certain events and signs which are to happen at very different times in history. Illustrative of this are Christ's prophecies of the things to come, first, upon Jerusalem, secondly, universally upon the church in all ages and, thirdly, upon those living on the earth at the time of His Second Advent in Mt 24, Lk 21 and Mk 14. Sometimes it is hard to determine exactly how to interpret

¹Sasse, Hermann, *We Confess*, Vol. II; p. 108

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Christ's words timewise concerning certain future events: in a near (closer to Apostle's times) or a far-removed perspective (a time close to the Judgment Day).

John R. Stephenson in the *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics*, Vol XIII, *Eschatology* treats these terms as the old eon and the new eon. An eon is a Greek term for a very long time period, an age or eternity (also of the world as a spatial concept). The distinction and the relation between the old and the new eon is crucial when interpreting particular words of the Bible concerning the Last Things.

According to Stephenson when speaking of the relation between the eternal and holy eon of Christ and the present limited eon of imperfection, sin and death, one must understand that the new eon (eternal world) has already entered the present mortal world.

Therefore, when thinking of the eschatological signs and of the end times in which the Christians have been living now for almost two thousand years, we must take into account the relation of the two eons in the light of the words of II Peter 3:8, *"But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but in forbearing toward you, not wishing that any would perish, but that all should reach repentance."*

The transcendent (unlimited) timeless world exists side by side with the immanent (limited) and mortal time. So, the signs of the coming of the transcendent world exist within the world of sin and limited time, in a likewise manner as the signs of the existence of a new and holy Adam within a Christian are being manifested by the mortal sinful flesh.

"The perishing old eon has been invaded by an eon suffused with the boundless life of God, an eon which will endure, according to the doxology, 'unto ages of ages'—a phrase rendered by the familiar 'world without end' and the more recent 'now and forever'. The two eons are no longer separated by a clear chronological break one from the other; the future has made a proleptic appearance in the present, so that both eons occupy at once the same time and space. Brought down to the

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*level of the individual member of the mystical body, the struggle between the two antithetical eons may be expressed through the well-known formula: simul iustus et peccator.*⁷²

Part II. Concerning the Time and the Character of the Second Coming of Christ

One thing is clear from Scriptures: no one can determine the exact time of Christ's *parousia*. In the history of the Christian church there has been an abundant number of attempts to predict an exact date for the Judgment Day. Mostly these speculations were derived from different interpretations of the Revelation of Apostle John.

The beast of the Book of Revelation chapter 13, waging war against the saints at times had been seen as Napoleon, Peter the Great, Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, also as the whole Soviet empire. In accordance with these interpretations there also had been multiple attempts to determine, if not an exact date, then, more or less emphatically, at least a proximity of the coming of Christ.

A most recent and most amazing example is the exegesis of chapter 13 of the Book of Revelation done by the famous Finnish Lutheran theologian Dr. Uuras Saarnivara. He saw the three sixes, the number of the Antichrist, as the three letters from the Greek alphabet representing the numbers, six hundred, sixty and six. ξ, χ. φ³ He positioned these letters in a special way, so that they formed a figure resembling a sickle, a hammer, and a snake in the middle. Those who followed his thought pattern were expecting the final stage of the world events right after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Yet, the Bible and Christ Himself state emphatically that no one, not even the Son of God according to his state of humiliation, can determine when the present world would come to an end and when the Son of God would appear again in glory and

⁷²John R. Stephenson, *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics*, Vol. XIII, *Eschatology*, pp.27, 28

³Uuras Saarnivara, *Can the Bible be Trusted*; pp. 758–762. U. Saarnivara is mostly known among Lutherans because of his scholarly work standing for the inerrancy of the Bible. His most important work, perhaps, is above quoted *Can the Bible be Trusted*. Dr. Saarnivara was connected with the Finnish pietist movement in Finland and the U.S.

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power. This is solely the knowledge of God the Father and is hidden from the world. “*But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son but the Father only.*” (Mt 24:36)

Acts records Christ’s conversation with the disciples just before the Ascension with regard to the promise to send the Holy Spirit soon. The disciples inquired of Christ about the future kingdom of Israel in connection with this promise. “*So, when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority.’*” (Acts 1:6,7)

According to the book of Acts these were Jesus’ last words to his disciples. In his answer he implies the reason for existence of this passing eon, namely the last days. And this eon still continues in order that the witness of Christ’s Gospel is brought to the far and distant ends of this earth and to all people whom God has elected to be saved.

It sounds like this question of the disciples implies an earthly reign of Christ. There was, of course, no millennial thought present there since the controversial Revelation 20:4 had not been written yet. Rather, the disciples were anxious to see Christ as the king of Israel soon. Actually, according to Dr. Raymond F. Surburg, the Jewish background thought of that time was rather positively prepared for the concept of the Judgment Day when the dead would rise and the faithful children of Israel would be rewarded and live forever.⁴

Scripture also teaches that the Second Advent of Christ will happen in majesty, that it will be sudden and unexpected for all men living at that time, both believers and non-believers. As the First Advent of Christ was in the state of humiliation of God-Man, so the second advent will be in the state of His exaltation.

Christ will come in power and glory as the King of the heavenly kingdom. At the time of His second coming will happen the

⁴Surburg, F; Raymond; *Introduction to the Intertestamental Period*; p. 67. He suggests that the apocryphal literature of the intertestamental period is a proof to that, for example, the book of Jesus Ben Sirach, or else called Ecclesiasticus.

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resurrection of the dead, both the believers and unbelievers. He will be accompanied by the holy angels who will help Him to bring all the people together before the Judgment throne.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:16 Apostle Paul writes, "*For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the Archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.*" Scripture is clear as to the fact that no one living on the earth at that time will miss Christ's coming.

As it will be the arrival of Christ with the heavenly host it will be like no other arrival of any king or power at all times. Just a few weeks ago President George Bush landed in the Riga airport in his Air Force Number One plane. It was quite a spectacular event and millions of people watched it on TV.

Yet, those who were at that time busy with their work, other thoughts or problems or simply were not interested in watching the news releases could miss the visit of the President of the United States to Latvia. But Christ's arrival will be a supernatural event and will be introduced by supernatural signals.

First will be *the cry of command, the Archangel's call, and the trumpet of God*. Those signals will be not a human means of calling to attention but supernatural signals that will be heard at the moment by everyone living on earth and even by the dead. The present eon will end and the eon of immortality and of timeless joyful life will set in.

Rev 14:14 pictures Christ's coming seated on a cloud with a sharp sickle in His hand. The sickle is not to be taken too literally since it is understood as a picture of Christ coming to gather the harvest of his people for the kingdom of heaven. Also Rev 19:11,14 describes Christ and the heavenly host coming seated on white horses which is to be understood as a metaphor of their triumphant arrival. It does not necessarily mean that Christ will be riding a heavenly horse.

Yet, Christ's sitting on a white cloud, perhaps, should be taken more in an actual sense since Acts 1:11 tells us that he will return on clouds just like he ascended to heaven. Also Rev 1:7, Mt 26:64, and Mk 14:62, where Jesus is interrogated by

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Caiaphas, pictures Christ's return as coming on clouds. Stephenson is pointing to Ex 13:21, 16:10, Nm 11:25, 14:14 where the earthly phenomenon of cloud was an external expression of the presence of the divine Majesty.⁵

Believers must not fear the future return of Christ since His return is the fulfillment of all the Christian hopes. The church militant will be turned into a church triumphant. Those who at all ages were scorning Christians with regard to our hope will be witnesses of the triumph of Christ and of his believers. 2 Peter 3:3-10 describes the situation at the time of coming of Christ that the mouths of scorners will be shut.

There will be no time left for preaching, teaching, baptizing, and repentance. Since it will be a supernatural extra focal event, Christ's coming will catch the unbelievers by surprise. Matt 24:27 and Lk 17:24 compares Christ's coming to a lightning "*that lights out of the one part of the heaven unto the other part unto heaven.*"

The consummation of this age will come unexpected and as a thief (Matt 24:44).

1 Thess 5:2. Dr. Luther in an Advent sermon emphasizes that a thief comes exactly at a time when he is the least feared and the least awaited. A thief's visit is always a shocking and a very unpleasant surprise. That is exactly what Christ's sudden appearance in the world will be for unbelievers who had been feeling themselves most secure.

Dr. Francis Pieper in a footnote to his *Christian Dogmatics* warns that Christ's coming will be so sudden and unexpected that (given the general idea that the Savior should be awaited facing to the East) Europe will not be able to flash word of his coming to America.⁶ Consequently, flashing of word will not be possible in the opposite direction either.

Part III: Millennialism—a Popular Error with regard to the Second Coming of Christ

There are many treatises in which the false idea of a one thousand year reign of Christ on this earth before the Final

⁵Stephenson, *Eschatology*; p. 99

⁶Pieper, Francis, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III; p. 516; footnote Nr. 30

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Judgment of Christ is defeated. First we must turn to the Augsburg Confession which states: "*Rejected, too, are certain Jewish opinions which are even now making an appearance and which teach that, before the resurrection of the dead saints and godly men will possess a worldly kingdom and annihilate the godless.*"⁷

The chiliastic ideas are almost as old as chapter 20 of the Book of Revelation. Apostolic fathers like Papias and Barnabas held to millennialistic views. It was partly derived from Jewish idea that the world would last 6,000 years, as foreshadowed in the six days of creation. Then would follow a millennium of Christ's rule, after which the eternity as an eighth day will enter the history.⁸

Also the first century Ebionist⁹ Jewish sect held to the millennialistic earthly rule of Christ.¹⁰ The second century church father Irenaeus was a moderate millennialist. He explains his millennialistic expectations in his doctrinal work *Adversus haereses*.¹¹

St. Augustine taught that the figure of one thousand years could be understood in two ways which both are not to be understood as millennialistic. He wrote that the thousand years must be understood either as a time which is left until the Judgment Day, or as an equivalent of the whole duration of the world.¹² Even his second opinion does not contradict the orthodox understanding of one thousand years.

Dr Heiko A. Oberman in his book "*Luther, Man Between God and the Devil*" writes of the dispensationalism in the Middle Ages in connection with the monastic movement. After the death of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope John XXII condemned the strict principle of poverty as it was demanded from the monks by St. Francis in his testament.

⁷CA, XVII

⁸Heglund, Bengt; *History of Theology*, p. 23

⁹In Hebrew *the poor*

¹⁰*History of Theology*, p. 32

¹¹*Ibid*; p. 51

¹²St. Augustin, *The City of God*, p. 720

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The Pope did so in order to preserve his ecclesiastic power. The conflict between the ascetic movement of the Franciscans and the Pope grew deeper. The struggle for poverty was connected with a hope for a millennium. The monks believed that soon there must be an end to the papal hierarchy, its greed and vainglory, and that the Friars Minor (the little, humble brethren) will rule the church for a thousand years.

About the time of St. Francis' death in 1226 Joachim of Fiore laid the foundation of the millennialist teaching which flourished in the Middle Ages. He taught that the history of church (humankind) follows a trinitarian pattern: the age of a Father which would correspond to the Old Testament period; the age of a Son and of a clerical church; and the age of a Holy Spirit—the spiritual church, which would last for a thousand years and that would be the era of dedicated friars.

The papacy fought against this teaching merely because that teaching allowed a thought that there will be a time on earth when the papal hierarchy would not be in power. Petrus Johannes Olivi (died in 1298) taught that the age of Holy Spirit was introduced by St. Francis, just as John the Baptist introduced the age of Christ.

In different parts of Europe many Hussites and Wycliffites allied themselves with millennialistic convictions. At first also Luther was well received by the camp of millennialists. Yet, he soon disappointed them because he was not interested in social changes which would have brought in the Christ's rule according to millennialists like Thomas Muenzer.¹³

A scriptural basis for millennialism is non-existent. Dr. Siegbert Becker in his commentary on the Revelation of John translates and explains the figurative meaning of the number of one thousand years, which in Rev 20:4 stands for the entire New Testament era. Also he proves the dispensationalist idea of two (or more) resurrections to be false. Dr. Becker writes that the "first" resurrection referred to in Rev 20:6 is a reference to what happened when spiritual life is given, and that 1 Th 4:16 is not to

¹³Oberman, Heiko; Luther, *Man Between God and the Devil*, pp. 57-61

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be understood as a proof for a false assumption of two separate resurrections in connection with Rev 20:5,6.¹⁴

Dr. Becker points out that if the dead Christians would be raised at the beginning of the thousand years, it would contradict Christ's words in John 6:39,40 where Jesus promises to raise all the believers at the last day, namely one day, not many days.¹⁵

Stephenson states, "*Not only does dispensationalism concoct a fictitious signs of our Lord's coming through its fantasies concerning God's purposes with respect to ethnic Jews; it also breeds errors under the headings of the parousia, the general resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, and even heaven itself. What Scripture presents as unitary events are transformed by dispensationalism into multiple happenings.*"¹⁶

At first glance the millennialistic false ideas look, perhaps, less harmful than the false views, for example, in the area of the doctrine of justification. Yet, the entire Christian doctrine by its character is not a collection of different biblical beliefs, but all the biblical articles of faith are in unity and they form a firm and single truth.

Therefore millennialism not only equips Christians with false hopes with regard to the last things and the end times, but could also affect doctrines of the original sin, the justification and the sanctification, perhaps, the means of grace, too. Since with this false fragmentation of God's coming grace the trust in the immediacy of God's grace and its application to sinners in the Baptism and the Lord's Supper are negatively affected, putting an emphasis on outward deeds of people bringing about the Kingdom of God instead of trust in God's declaration that He has pardoned the world because He has punished his son instead.

¹⁴1 Thessalonians 4:16,17 teaches that at Christ's coming first the dead in Christ shall be raised and then they will join in heaven with the living believers. From the context it is clear that there is no reference to two separate resurrections. In these passages Paul is speaking only of the believers. The resurrection of the unbelievers is left outside of the picture there.

¹⁵Becker, Siegbert W., *Revelation*; pp. 304-311

¹⁶Stephenson, John; *Eschatology*; p. 83

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One believing in the fragmentation of God's Second Advent could be led to a false perception of Christ's proximity to every single soul of a believer. Millennialists willingly or unwillingly make Christ a more worldly King and emphasize worldly political events and personalities over a small remnant of true believers.

For millennialists world politics and the power position of the church in the worldly battles are more important than the Christian doctrine and the confessions of the church, since they are concerned with a battle of Gog and Magog. And this battle (depending on which group of millennialists they belong to) they perceive more as a World War of some sort.

Dispensationalists in their understanding of the events around the thousand-year rule of Christ are not united. Not delving in their different interpretations too deeply, we could classify the millennial camp as *Premillennial*, *Postmillennial* and *Praeterist*.

[Dispensational] Premillennialism sets two different and unequal salvation programs: one for the Jews, the other for the rest of nations. They hold that the future redeemed Israel will be the center of government and spreading of the Gospel to the nations of the world. In this they reject the truth that Christ already has come to redeem Israel, and that He is now the King and the ruler.

Postmillennialism teaches that before the coming of Christ there will be a golden age for the church. They neglect the fact that Christ already rules in this old eon through the Word and Sacraments. This understanding corresponds with the millennial hopes of the friars and mendicant monks of the Middle Ages.

Preterist views prophecies as already fulfilled.¹⁷ Preterists spiritualize Mt 24 as having already taken place in the past and believe that Christ actually returned to Jerusalem in 70 AD, fulfilling the prophecy of the Second Advent. These false views represent different hermeneutics and different types of exegesis. These positions differ not only in methodology but also in the way they understand biblical history.

¹⁷*praeter*, lat. before

Part IV: Concerning the Evidence that we are living at the End Times

End times, the final age, the latter days, the time afterward of the days, in days to come—all of these are biblical terms stated in the Old and the New Testament in Hebrew and in Greek. Is 2:2 definitely speaks of the Messianic age: “*It shall come to pass **in the latter days** that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains. . . and all the nations shall flow to it.*”

Also Micah 4:1 repeats the very same words. Hosea 3:5 prophesies: “. . . and they (the children of Israel) shall come in fear to the LORD and to his goodness **in the latter days**.” In the Old Testament this phrase is used also to denote some closer future events which will befall the people, like in Num 24:14, Jer 48:47, Ez 38, Dan 10:14, all of which are warnings of the consequences of ungodliness.

Since it is true, that we cannot guess the time for the judgment day, why then may we claim to be living in the end times? The quoted passages from the Old Testament state that there will be end times without specifying the starting point in time. Then we must further consult the Scripture.

Heb 1:2 and Jl 2:28 denote the entire Messianic age beginning with the incarnation of Christ and the Pentecost as the latter days or end time. Joel 2:28 says “*And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh . . .*” That was fulfilled on the Pentecost day according to Peter’s first sermon in Acts 2:17. Hebrews 1:1,2 denotes the end times as the entire Messianic age, “*In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son . . .*”¹⁸

The Apostles themselves believed that they were living in the very end days. Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 describes how those living believers at the time of Christ’s Second Advent will be caught up in the clouds together with the resurrected ones. He writes “*we who are alive, who are left,*” most likely Paul means himself and his contemporaries.

¹⁸All English quotes are from R.S.V.

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Secondly, there are special signs which are to remind all the New Testament era people that we actually are living in the end times or latter days. Christ promises these special signs for the latter days in Mt 24:4-14 (also the synoptic passages of Mark and Luke). History provides a proof for us that ever since the times of the apostles it is the latter days, because there have risen countless false prophets, there have been endless wars, there have been famines and earthquakes.

There has been a constant persecution of the genuine Christian doctrine at almost all the New Testament era periods. Countless Christians have fallen from faith because of the false doctrine, and wickedness is so multiplied that the faith of many has grown cold. Yet, a remnant of faith is present and the Gospel is still preached in the world.

So we must believe that we are living in end times and one day the end will come for the world unexpectedly as a thief. Dr. Luther in one of his Epiphany sermons, is speaking of the special signs mentioned by Christ: earthquakes, flood, astronomical signs, and he states that “the fool” Aristotle and all his followers describe such signs as natural.

Luther also states that whatever the world and all the scientists say, and regardless of the scientific explanation of such signs, Christians should hold onto Christ’s words that these are God’s provided special signs warning and also comforting the people of God that we are living in the end times. Luther’s reliance on Scripture is rather striking: *“The course of the heavens has been so arranged from eternity that before the last day these signs must appear; by God has created none that is not a token of future evil. Thus also the blind leader Aristotle, writing a book about the phenomena of the heavens, attributes all to nature and declares these are no signs. Our learned men follow him and thus one fool fills the world with fools. Let us know that though the heavenly bodies wander in their courses according to law, God has still made these to be signs or tokens of his wrath.”*¹⁹

¹⁹Luther’s *Church Postil*, Vol. X; p. 66

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Part V. How a Christian should Await our Savior

A Christian is living in this world but does not belong to it since a Christian is a citizen of the new eon which has come with Christ. It is easy to say but it is not so easy to live. The Bible teaches that a Christian should be submissive not only to the agents of the Kingdom of God (His Word and the sacraments) but also to the authorities of this world. Therefore this world still has a certain strong domain in our life, in our body and also in our soul not only according to our sinful nature but also according to our regenerated nature.

In fact Christians every day mostly go around taking care of their worldly business, even the most devout ones and even those who labor on behalf of the church as its spiritual leaders. Just think how much time of our life all together is spent just taking care of various bureaucratic issues which are provided by state and local governments as mandatory.

Luther's wit burst out saying that God sustains this time and energy-consuming secular state in order to remind people that we are not yet in Paradise. We may say that especially the modern bureaucrats have success in proving that Luther was right.

Yet, people have to do their duties pertaining to this world. Therefore, as our worldly duties grow more complicated, as they multiply day by day, and as they become more time-consuming, so also grows the tension inside a Christian since we belong to and we long for the other kingdom and our very daily existence testifies to the conflict between the two worlds.

However, it is not that we can perceive the coming of the age of perfection and immortality exclusively in faith. Perhaps we may even say that it is not that we live awaiting Christ's Second Advent only by faith in unseen and promised things alone, but our faith in invisible promises of God are sustained also by seeing and perceiving, because Christ has provided signs of the end times which we can see and which we can experience.

We see and experience disastrous things in nature, threatening comets, falling asteroids, meteorites and darkening of the sun and of the moon; we see apostasy, we see wars and violence, terrorism and killing of the innocent; we see gross immorality,

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corruption and a perverted way of life; we see even corruption inside of the church. These signs announce the presence of the mortal and sinful age.

God has provided that we may experience his promised signs and thus find even a comfort, so that we can joyfully and eagerly await our Savior. Stephenson organizes all the scriptural signs of the latter days under four divisions. First, are the signs of God's judgment in the present. Even though the execution of God's wrath in full will happen on the Judgment Day, Rom 1:18 states that the divine anger against the iniquity is being manifested already in the present.²⁰ Christians often suffer because of those ungodly people who despise the Ten Commandments.

On the contrary, the unbelieving world, when experiencing the consequences of sin, always raises a question of theodicy asking how things like threatening pestilences, famines, all "natural" disasters, are reconcilable with the existence of the God of love. After the terrors of World War II the secular and atheistic minds accused the traditional Christianity of excluding the human freedom and the sense of responsibility for this world. Therefore, the hope for the future of the postmodern time was put on purely secular and humanistic principles.²¹ We must understand that God exercises all these terrifying divine judgments as anticipations of the last judgment.²²

Second, in the world there are signs of rebellion against God. People despise God's gift of life, murdering unwanted children. The evidence sought by the liberals that there is an enduring positive result of some dialectic of morals does not exist. The two World Wars, death camps during Nazi and Soviet rule, present-time terrorism and criminal violence speak just the opposite.

The true Christian doctrine of Original Sin, all the miracles of the Bible, the doctrine of Justification, the authority of the Scriptures, and many other Biblical truths had been questioned and rejected not only by the unbelievers but also by theologians. All kinds of sins against the Sixth Commandment are being publicly advertised and they have a tendency to multiply. Accordingly,

²⁰*Eschatology*; pp. 65,66

²¹Grenz, S; Olson, R; *XXth Century Theologi*; p. 170

²²*Eschatology*; p. 66

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the family institution is not valued as it should be and an ever-increasing divorce rate is a sign of today.

Third, there are signs of rebellion inside the church. In his letter to the Christians of Stassburg against the enthusiasts Luther writes that Christ must not only have Caiaphas among his foes, but also Judas among his friends.²³ Ever since the first century Gnostics, Arians, latter day enthusiastic spirits, papists, Calvinists, baptists, rationalists, pietists, Bible critics and all kinds of sectarians and Universalists, the heresy as a rebellion against the truth of God has been present. For many in church all kinds of false teachings had been more appealing to the sinful flesh than the truth of God. *“For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray.”* (Mt 24:5)

Fourth is the sign of preaching the Gospel in the whole world. Not diving into a discussion of how much of this very special sign belongs to the realized eschatology and how much there is left for the inaugurated eschatology to carry on, it is clear that this sign obliges also us to preach the Gospel to the world. This mission is to be understood in a wider sense of the word.

So many theologians have tried to blend Christian doctrine with modern secular philosophy and concepts, emptying it of truths unacceptable to the proud sinful human mind. But on the contrary and in spite of all the rejection of Christ and His doctrine, we hear the Word of God still proclaimed and we see believers in the midst of the unbelieving world.

These facts, both the dreadful signs and the presence of the Gospel in the world, serve as signs which testify of the immediate presence of God's kingdom and of its conflict with the sinful world. It proves the apocalyptic vision of the Bible concerning the end times of this world to be true. Consequently, the existing evidence for the biblical truth in this age is serving as a proof that also Christ's words concerning the things which are yet to come are true.

Dr. Luther, in his Advent sermon on the text from Lk 21, where Luke records Christ's words that at the end times men will be “fainting for fear” seeing the signs of the end times, writes, *“For*

²³*Eschatology*; p. 74

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*Christ speaks as if he would separate the fear and the things which they fear; and so divides these that he gives to them the fear and to the world the things which they fear. It is to be presumed that by this fear and anxiety, they are to have their hell and death here, while the world, which fears nothing, will have death and hell hereafter.*²⁴

The paradox is that this world, which is full of trouble, teaches and gives Christians the evidence that Christ's Second Advent is to be awaited eagerly and sincerely. A cross always follows the confession of the Christian faith and a godly life. This in fact proves that a believer is in real conflict with the beliefs and values of this world.

The devil's temptation for a Christian is to leave his faith and his cross of a confessor of faith and to cling to the promises and the opportunities of this world. It had been true at all times, yet the devilish pressure from the secular unbelieving world today becomes even more intense.

Since the numbers of Christians are diminishing in that part of the world which traditionally had been called Christian, it becomes much more difficult to stand in faith against the pressure from the unbelieving part of the society. It is especially true for those believers who represent the confession of faith of the minority in communities where they live.

That is true of my country Latvia as well as the entire European Union. Materialism, cult of flesh, immorality, heathen and occult practices or quasi-Christian universalism at the best is shaping the spiritual portrait of most of Europe today.

Recently, after the death of Pope John Paul II, all the media were crowded with the information of his death and burial. Even Latvian Radio One, which is a state-owned radio station, was announcing after a week of the burial that finally the access to the grave site of the Pope is open for the public, obviously suggesting pilgrimage of some sort. The first page of "Svetdienas Rīts,"²⁵ the official media of the liberal Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, on the day when the new Pope Benedict the

²⁴Luther's *Church Postil*, Vol. X; p. 72

²⁵"Sunday Morning" in Latvian

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XVIth was introduced to the world, announced in huge bold print: "We have a Pope".

The pope tastelesly is being pictured as the father of all Christianity and even above that. This is a dreadful reality which corresponds with the Apocalypse of John which the Lord allowed him to see on the island of Patmos two thousand years ago. The Babylonian harlot (Revelation, Chapters 17 and 18), which is the institution of papacy according to Lutheran exegesis, demonstrated herself shamelessly. Secular powers literally bowed before the dead and also the new leader of the apostate institution of Rome.

Dr. Siegbert W. Becker writes in his commentary on the Book of Revelation, "*Babylon, then is a name not only for the antichristian forces at work in the visible church of the New Testament, but also of the Old Testament. Most of the prophets who were killed during the course of the Old Testament were not slain by the heathen nations but by men who outwardly called themselves God's people and yet had apostasized from the true God.*"²⁶

Apostates and false prophets are even more numerous than ever and they are deceiving many. With this situation in mind and also taking into account the terrible destiny which awaits this world Apostle Peter writes, "*Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God.*" (2 Peter 3:11,12)

Paul writes to Titus these words, "*For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.*" (Titus 2:11-14)

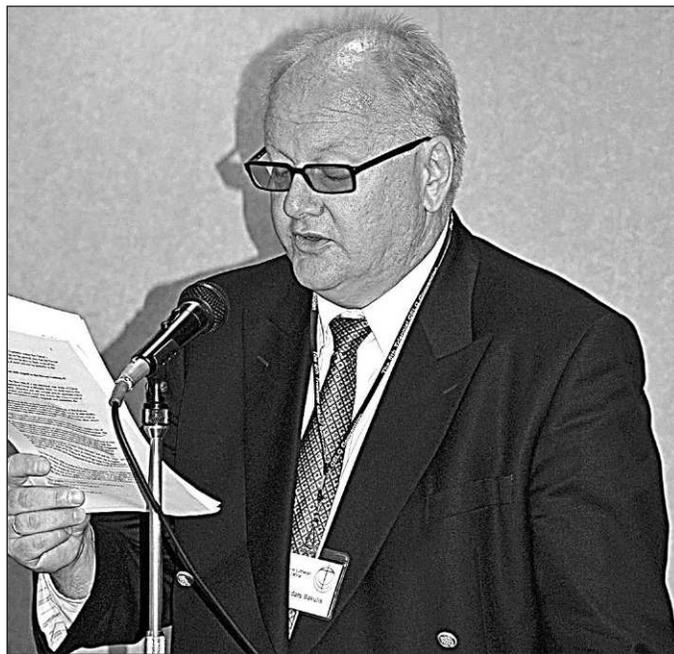
No comment is necessary since these and many similar texts in the letters of the Apostles are self-explanatory. However, for a

²⁶Becker, *Revelation*; p. 277

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sinful man, even for a sincere and devout Christian, this is not easy to read without fear since our godly lives are stained by many sins. Encouraging and putting straight the purpose of Christ's coming Luther writes, "*Fear must pass out of the soul and there must enter in a desire for righteousness and for that day. But if you really desire to be free from sin and to be holy, then give thanks to God and continue to desire to be more free from sin. . . . There is no one so well prepared for the judgment day as he who longs to be without sin. If you have such desire, what do you fear? You are then in perfect accord with the purpose of that day.*"²⁷

Yet, a Christian does not have to fear the threatening signs of our Lord's coming. The people of our churches must be reminded of the words of Luther, that the Lord has separated



Gundars Bakulis of Latvia

²⁷Luther's *Church Postil*, Vol. X; pp. 76,77

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the fear from what is feared and the sorrow of a believer will be turned into joy soon.

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