

**THE ETERNAL WORD: A LUTHERAN CONFESSION
FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

ARTICLE V

**EAGERLY AWAIT THE SAVIOR: THE DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS
(ESCHATOLOGY)**

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (Philippians 3:20, 21). In these words St. Paul reminds us that we are citizens of heaven, we are bound for the promised land above. This was not always the case. By nature we were strangers and aliens, slaves and prisoners outside the kingdom of heaven (Ephesians 2:19). Yet Christ the God–Man, our Savior, through his redemptive work has provided citizenship for all people. He loved us so much that he lived a holy life in our place and gave himself into death as the one sufficient ransom to free us from the domination of sin, death, and the devil. He took upon himself our sin, our death, and our hell so that we could have his righteousness, life and heaven. That treasure is brought to us today through the means of grace, and is received by faith which is worked through those same means of grace.

Now we are traveling here as pilgrims desiring to reach our true homeland above (Hebrews 11:13, 14). In all the difficulties and struggles of this life we are nourished through the heavenly manna, the life-giving Word and the holy sacraments. In the heavenly Canaan beyond the Jordan of death, we will enjoy our citizenship in full. There all sorrows and tears will be wiped away and we will have joy and peace forevermore. On the Last Day even this body, which is growing old and will wither and die, will come forth from the grave glorified and so we will ever be with the Lord both body and soul in joy in the heavenly fatherland, Jerusalem the golden with milk and honey blessed.

Eschatology, or the doctrine of the last things, deals with such things as death, resurrection, judgment and eternal life. In the means of grace the Christian has an eschatological event in the here and now. He has the already and the not yet. We have the blessings of the Last Day and salvation already, but not yet in their fullness. Through the Word of God we were born again to a living hope (1 Peter 1:23). We are a new creation and we already have the new heaven and new earth in the Gospel. We already have the new creation but not yet in fullness (2 Corinthians 5:17). In baptism the Christian already experiences death and resurrection which will climax in the death of the body and the final resurrection (Romans 6; Colossians 2:11,12). In the Lord's Supper the Christian already feasts with the Lamb once slain which will culminate in the Lamb's high feast in eternity. He has the feast already in foretaste but not yet in fullness (Luke 22:16,18; 1 Corinthians 11:26).

I. EAGERLY AWAIT THE SAVIOR AS YOU PREPARE FOR DEATH

The definition of death

As we travel this earthly life we are moving closer and closer to death. Sooner or later every person must face death. Death awaits everyone, no matter who they are: a president or a king, a shepherd or a fisherman, a scientist or an actor, a man or a woman, an adult or a little child. Human history shows that all people are mortal. Death may be sudden and unexpected, or it may come as a result of a lingering illness and chronic suffering.

Physicians debate when a person is dead. Some say that death occurs when the heart stops beating. Others say that death occurs when the brain stops functioning. Only the Scripture, however, gives the correct understanding of what death is and when it occurs. Temporal death is not the total destruction or annihilation of an individual. Scripture teaches that temporal death is the separation of body and soul. In the parable of the rich fool, the Lord said, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you” (Luke 12:20). That night his soul and body were separated and his life ceased here on earth. In describing death, Solomon wrote, “The dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

Scripture speaks of death in a three-fold manner:

Temporal death: This is the separation of the soul from the body (Ecclesiastes 12:7). “When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust” (Psalm 104:29).

Spiritual death: This is the separation of a person from God as a result of sin (Isaiah 59:2). Because of sin, human beings are by nature dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more” (Ephesians 4:18,19).

Eternal death: This is the separation of body and soul from the gracious presence of God forever in hell (Matthew 25:41). “They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

The cause and purpose of death

At first sight the causes of death may appear to be natural: illness, accidents, natural disasters (tornados, floods, earthquakes), famine and wars. But Scripture reveals that the real cause of death is something else. God did not create man to die but to live forever in his gracious presence. Man became mortal because of sin. “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). St. Paul summarizes the cause of man’s death in the most concise expression: “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Death came to people as a result of sin: “in Adam all die” (1 Corinthians 15:22).

Death, then, is universal. It is the common experience of all descendants of Adam. The writer to the Hebrews states “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). All

those born in the natural way are born in original sin, that is the total corruption of the entire human nature, destined for death and eternal punishment (Psalm 51:5). Death is the inheritance of all people. It is the just punishment for sin. But as soon as our first parents fell into sin, God promised the Savior, the seed of the woman who crushed the power of Satan through his cross and freed us from the tyranny of death (Genesis 3:15). By faith in Christ as the Savior, temporal death is no longer the terrible end of everything but rather the gateway to eternal life in heaven.

For those who do not believe in Christ, death is punishment for their sins. Temporal death is the entrance into eternal death in hell. For the unbeliever death is a fulfillment of the horrifying warning: “Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you” (Psalm 73:27).

Death is universal but there are exceptions. Enoch and Elijah were taken to heaven without seeing death (Genesis 5:24; 2 Kings 2:11). Those who are alive at Christ’s second coming will not see death. They will go directly to the judgment of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:16,17; 1 Corinthians 15:51).

What happens to body and soul at death

When temporal death occurs, the soul is separated from the body. The body decays or returns to the dust of the ground, as the Lord said, “Dust you are and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19; cf. also Ecclesiastes 3:20). While the body decays, the soul is immortal. It continues to exist. To the thief on the cross the Lord said, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). That very day his soul was separated from his body and was taken to the Lord in glory.

At the time of death, the soul of the believer is immediately with the Lord in the joys of heaven (Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Revelation 14:13; Philippians 1:23,24). Jesus says to the believers, “Come you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (Matthew 25:34). To the believer the wonderful inheritance of heaven is given. While it is impossible for us to fully understand the joy and wonder of heaven, the Bible uses certain pictures to explain it. Heaven is described as the great wedding feast of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9), as a beautiful mansion home (John 14:2), and as a city of gold and precious stones (Revelation 21:11-21). Also, it is called Paradise, showing that it will have all those delights which our first parents enjoyed in the Garden of Eden (Luke 23:43).

Luther, to describe heaven to his ten year old son Hans, said it was like a beautiful garden “where there are many children wearing little golden coats. [They] pick up fine apples, pears, cherries, [and] yellow and blue plums under the trees; they sing, jump, and are merry. They also have nice ponies with golden reins and silver saddles” (LW 49:323). The point is we should look upon heaven as the most wonderful thing imaginable. All sorrows and tears will be wiped away, and we will have joy forevermore being united with all the saints who have gone before (Revelation 21:4). On the Last Day, the soul of the believer will be reunited with his body, only glorified, and so he will ever be with the Lord in glory. Most important we will have union and communion with God, beholding our Savior face to face in the beatific vision (1 Thessalonians 2:19).

The soul of the unbeliever is immediately in hell (Luke 16:22,23; 1 Peter 3:19,20). On the Last Day, the soul of the unbeliever will be reunited with his body and he will spend eternity in the horrors of hell where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12; Matthew 24:51). Hell is the most terrible thing that we can imagine. It is complete separation from the gracious presence of God (2 Thessalonians 1:9). Jesus says to those who rejected him, “Depart from me, you who are cursed into eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). This horrible place was never meant for man, but it was created for the angels led by Satan who rebelled against God (2 Peter 2:4). Still, because man rejects Christ and prefers to follow Satan, this is his rightful lot. There is no place more terrible. It is pictured as a place of eternal fire, and yet the body never dies. In the Old Testament Isaiah saw hell as a place where the skin worms are forever eating at the body which cannot die (Isaiah 66:24). All this reminds us of the horror awaiting those who reject Jesus.

The intermediate state between death and the last day

At the hour of death, the soul goes either to heaven or hell. The soul of the believer is immediately with the Lord in glory enjoying the wonders of heaven (Luke 23:43), while the soul of the unbeliever is in eternal punishment (Luke 16:22,23). Therefore Scripture does not teach *psychopannychism* or the **concept of soul sleep**, the idea that the soul is not conscious between the time of death and the Last Day. The souls of the dead are now in a conscious state in heaven or hell.

Some maintain that there is a **second chance** for salvation after death. If an individual has not had the opportunity to hear the Gospel, he is given this opportunity after death. The Scripture does not speak of a second chance after death. Rather it states “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). A person’s time of grace is during this earthly existence (2 Corinthians 6:2). When he dies he faces the judgment. There is no opportunity to come to faith in the Savior after death.

A person faces the judgment at the time of death. At the same time Scripture speaks of the final judgment on the Last Day (Matthew 25:32). The final judgment is confirmation of what occurred at the hour of death. Thus we speak of a private judgment and a public judgment on the Last Day of the world.

The Roman Catholic church maintains there is a place of purification after death, referred to as **purgatory**. Here the full and final salvation of the soul is accomplished by its own suffering and by Masses and prayers said for the dead. This implies that one is able to help in his own salvation. The Roman Catholic church officially states:

All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.... The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 1030,1031)

The idea of purification after death is contrary to Scripture. We are saved by nothing we do or accomplish but alone through the work of Christ. “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8,9). Salvation was complete when Jesus said “It is finished” on the cross (John 19:30). No further atonement sacrifice is required since his sacrifice was once and for all, “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

In many of the religions that developed in the Far East, the concept of **reincarnation** is found. This is the idea that at death the soul passes into another body, be that the body of a human being or an animal, for the purpose of purification until it returns to the divine essence. This view is contrary to the teaching of God’s Word. According to the Bible, departed souls enter either into paradise or the prison of hell.

The idea of **ghosts and hauntings** has become very popular in our society. Ghosts are believed to be the souls of the departed come back to earth to haunt places and people. Mediums hold séances trying to conjure up the dead. Since Scripture teaches that the souls of the dead are either in heaven or hell, we reject the concept of ghosts. If hauntings and other ghostly activities occur, it is the result of demons and not the souls of the dead.

The Christian’s attitude in facing and preparing for death

As a Christian faces his own death or the death of a loved one he indeed weeps. The death of a loved one fills us with sorrow because we are facing the separation from one most near and dear. Even our Lord cried at the grave of his dear friend Lazarus (John 11:35). Our own death can be a fearful thing because we are separated from many things that we know and understand. This body was never meant to die, but rather to live with God in glory. When the cold, grim monster of death begins to crawl over this body, it is only natural that we are afraid. It certainly can be a dreadful experience.

The Christian indeed weeps facing death but not as those who have no hope. The Christian has confident hope in Jesus Christ who by his suffering, death and resurrection conquered death. Death no longer has any power over us for it has lost its sting (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). Jesus entered into the monster of death itself, ripping it to pieces, so now death for the Christian is not the terrible end of everything but rather it is a passage to the new and great beginning in joy.

Because of Christ’s redemptive work the grave for the believer’s body has become a restful sleeping place while the soul is with Jesus in glory awaiting the Last Day (John 11:25,26; John 14:1-6). Then this very body will be reunited with the soul and break forth from the grave glorified like unto Christ’s glorified body and so we will ever be with the Lord in joy everlasting (Philippians 3:21). Every Christian casket is closed in sorrow but in confident hope that it will break forth in victory; for death has been swallowed up by the Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

Death for the righteous is an escape from suffering, temptation, fear, terror, harm, and the dangers to which man is always exposed in our sinful world. Concerning those who die in the Lord, the holy

writer states “The righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death” (Isaiah 57:1,2).

Death for the believer is the entry into the mansions of heaven as our Lord promises: “In my Father’s house are many mansions” (John 14:2 [NKJV]). The death of a righteous man leads to a joyful resurrection. “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake; some to everlasting life” (Daniel 12:2).

The Christian then will always desire to be prepared for the last hour. This is only possible by despairing of anything in ourselves to obtain salvation. Rather, we will daily return to our baptism through true repentance and faith, trusting alone in Christ who has already paid for all of our sins on the cross. This faith in the Savior will be continually strengthened through a regular use of holy Word and blessed sacrament. Then we will indeed be prepared for our last hour and our Lord’s coming. Lord come quickly (1 Corinthians 16:22)!

We reject the following errors:

1. That the soul of the believer enters a state of sleep after death.
2. That there is a second chance for salvation after death.
3. That there is a purgatory.
4. That the soul enters a new body after death.
5. That there is no life after death.

II. EAGERLY AWAIT THE SAVIOR AS YOU ANTICIPATE RESURRECTION AND GLORIFICATION

Who will be raised bodily from death?

All people will be raised for Scriptures clearly state that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked (Acts 24:15). The same body that was born into this life and which was destroyed through death, whether or not it belonged to the believer or an unbeliever, shall be raised. It does not matter whether one was properly buried or not, the body shall be reunited with the soul (Job 19:26,27). Mueller states:

While the righteous shall rise from the dead by virtue of the merit of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:20-22), the godless will rise by divine power communicated to Christ’s human nature through the personal union and the exaltation to the right hand of God, by which he sustains, rules, and governs all things in heaven and on earth in his general Kingdom of Power... (Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*: 629).

When Christ comes again on the last day, some people will still be living. Such people will not experience reuniting of body and soul as the case will be for those raised from the dead.

Who will be bodily glorified?

Believers in Christ can look forward to being glorified because they shall be raised in glory. The righteous shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father (Matthew 13:43). Chemnitz observes:

[The bodies are heavenly] not with respect to substance, but with respect to qualities because they will shine with heavenly light and glory, will no longer be subject to infirmities, but will be distinguished by their heavenly luster and no longer be disfigured, corrupt, imperfect, maimed and unsightly, but most beautiful, pleasing to the sight, perfect, handsome and complete in members (Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*: 642).

These qualities can be illustrated in the body of Christ when he rose from the dead and was placed at the right hand of God the Father. Our bodies will be like the resurrected body of Christ (Philippians 3:21).

On the other hand, the unbelievers' bodies will not be glorified. They will rise from death to suffer shame and contempt (Daniel 12:2). Chemnitz again observes:

Although the bodies of the wicked and the damned will be...immortal, yet they will not be impassible, but will be subject to eternal tortures, and will be adorned by no honor, no glory, no power, no spiritual excellence, but will be marked by perpetual foulness, destined to eternal disgrace and oppressed by infernal darkness. They are vessels made unto dishonor and disgrace (Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*: 643).

What is involved in the glorification of the body?

While for the time being, here on earth, we do not fully understand what is involved in the glorification of our bodies, Scripture gives us some insight as to what will happen when Christ comes again on the Last Day. The glorified bodies will have the following characteristics as Professor Lyle Lange points out:

- (a) Our bodies will not be spirits, but they will be spiritual in nature (1 Corinthians 15:44-47). We will not need food or drink, sleep or rest. It is also true that the glorified bodies will be governed by the new man.
- (b) Hunger, thirst, pain, and cold will be excluded (Revelation 7:16).
- (c) Our bodies will be freed from every danger and possibility of death (1 Corinthians 15:42-53).
- (d) Our bodies will not be weakened by the ravages of sin (1 Corinthians 15:43).
- (e) Our bodies will be able to reflect the glory of our loving God (1 Corinthians 15:41-43).
- (f) There will be no defects (Philippians 3:21; 1 Corinthians 15:43). When Jesus arose, his body still bore imprints of the nails in his hands and feet and the spear hole in his side. These marks were probably for the purpose of positive identification (John 20:27). They were not defects. Concerning the age or youthfulness of the resurrection bodies, we will find out when

Christ comes again (Lange, *God so Loved the World*: 629).

The renewal or restoration of creation and the new heavens and new earth

There are some people who hold that God will reduce the world to nothing on the Last Day including all created things, with the exception of intelligent creatures and then create a new world. One of the passages used in support of annihilation is Luke 21:33 where it says, “Heaven and earth shall pass away.” Others are of the view that while the present world will certainly be destroyed, its fundamental substance will not be destroyed. From the atoms composing this substance a new heaven and a new earth will be fashioned. One of the passages cited by proponents of renovation is 1 Corinthians 7:31 where it says, “The fashion of this world passes away.” One thing we know for sure, since the Bible teaches it clearly, is that the earth in its present form will be destroyed by fire. What we do not know is whether or not this destruction will result in annihilation or renovation. All we can do is wait and see what God will do on the Last Day.

The Christian’s attitude and comfort in anticipating resurrection and renewal

The expectation of resurrection and renewal should incite every Christian to greater faith and sustain them in their faithful following of Christ (Matthew 10:22). Sure hope of eternal life motivates believers to endure much tribulation before they can enter into God’s kingdom of glory. In Matthew we read: “For great is our reward in heaven” (Matthew 5:11,12). Although we are still in this world, we are not to be of the world. “Present life is lived in the light of the life to come, and this gives meaning and direction to our sojourn on earth” (Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*: 317).

We reject the following errors:

1. That there is no resurrection of the body as taught in Scripture.
2. That we may rationalize and fulfill human curiosity concerning the resurrection contrary to clear statements of Scripture.

III. EAGERLY AWAIT THE SAVIOR AS YOU LOOK FORWARD TO CHRIST’S RETURN

The “signs of the times” to observe and ponder as the end approaches

Jesus is coming again, and he is coming soon. This is the message of the entire New Testament. Yes, people of the Old Testament also knew of the Lord’s Second Coming for judgment. Jude tells us that “Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men: ‘See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him’” (Jude 14,15). Job said, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth” (Job 19:25). Daniel and Isaiah also spoke of the end of the world (Daniel 12:2,3; Isaiah 66:24).

However, the theme that Christ is coming again soon is repeated throughout the entire New Testament. Whether it is Paul, Peter, John, or James, all have the same message. Paul wrote, “The hour has 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” (Romans 13:11,12). Peter wrote, “The end of all things is near” (1 Peter 4:7). John wrote, “Dear children, this is the last hour” (1 John 2:18). James wrote, “The Judge is at the door” (James 5:9). The writer to the Hebrews stated, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25). The last words of Jesus to his church tell us, “Yes, I am coming soon” (Revelation 22:20).

Were all of these people mistaken? It has been close to 2000 years since these words were written, and Jesus has not come yet. Peter foretold the coming of scoffers who would say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:4). Peter cited four reasons why the scoffers were in error. Reason one was that God formed this world out of nothing by the power of his Word (2 Peter 3:5). This indicates that the world God created he can also destroy. Reason two was that, by the same power of his Word, God sent a universal flood to wipe a wicked generation of people from the face of the earth (2 Peter 3:6). God has the power to intervene in history and to send a global catastrophe which can destroy the world. Reason three is that, by the same power of his Word, God will end this world and will come for the final judgment (2 Peter 3:7). It is not a matter of “if” Jesus will come again. It is simply a question of “when” he will come again. The fourth reason Peter cited as to why the scoffers are mistaken is that God’s timetable is not our timetable. “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day” (2 Peter 3:8).

We need to remember that the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was the culmination of God’s promise of salvation, first made in Eden. What is left in history? The church is to proclaim the gospel so that God may gather in his elect before he comes for judgment. Ever since Christ rose from the dead, we have been living in the last days of the world. For this reason, the apostles were not mistaken when they said Jesus’ Second Coming was imminent.

Christ came into the flesh, and he is coming again—soon.

The Bible identifies the New Testament era as “the last days” of the world. Peter declared that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was something which occurred in the last days (Acts 2:17). The writer to the Hebrews declared that Christ spoke as God’s great Prophet in the last days (Hebrews 1:2). The book of Revelation speaks of Satan being bound for 1000 years (Revelation 20:2). This is not to be taken as a literal number. Ten is a number which is used by the Bible to signify completeness. The number ten cubed signifies the entire period of the New Testament, no matter how many years it will be.

The Bible tells us that there will be signs throughout the last days to remind us that Jesus is coming again. Jesus himself identified these signs for his disciples when he spoke of the last days from the Mount of Olives during Holy Week (Matthew 24). Jesus and his disciples were leaving the temple when the disciples commented on how beautiful it looked. Jesus then said, “I tell you the truth, not one

stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down” (Matthew 24:2). Jesus crossed over the Kidron Valley with his disciples, ascended the Mount of Olives, and sat down on the hill facing the city of Jerusalem. It was then that his disciples came to him and asked, “Tell us...when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3).

Jesus’ answer to his disciples weaves together the signs which will signal the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the last days of the world, and his Second Coming in judgment. The signs which Jesus describes as occurring throughout the New Testament era (the last days) as reminders of his Second Coming fall into three categories: signs in nature, signs in society, and signs in the church.

Among the signs in nature which Jesus mentioned are earthquakes. Any disaster in nature is a reminder of how transitory this world is. Hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis, and earthquakes all over the globe have reminded us of how fragile this world really is. It may seem permanent. However, God who made the world by the power of his Word will also end it by the power of his Word. Every time one of these disasters in nature occurs, it is like a knock at the door. Christ is telling us, “Be ready! I can come at any time. The end is near.”

Jesus said that signs would occur in society during the last days to remind us that he is coming again. He mentioned that there will be hostility among the nations, wars, plagues and famines. Paul wrote, “But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Timothy 3:1-4). Every time we see these things going on in society, it is a sign that “the end is near.”

Jesus also mentioned that, during the last days, there will be signs in the church to indicate Christ’s Second Coming is near. The Bible speaks of the rise of false prophets, a falling away from the gospel, and the rise of the Antichrist (Matthew 24; 2 Timothy 3:1-4; 2 Thessalonians 2). These signs have reoccurred throughout the New Testament era. The errors of Gnosticism, Manichaeism and Arianism plagued the early church. Roman Catholicism misled many people throughout the Dark Ages and still misleads many today. Paul mentioned the Antichrist was at work already in his day (2 Thessalonians 2:7). When we see the results of rationalism on the church from the eighteenth century on, the rise of Mormonism and the Jehovah’s Witnesses in America in the nineteenth century, we see a great falling away from the faith. All these remind us that Christ is coming again.

Are there any signs which have to be fulfilled yet before Christ can come again? Jesus said, “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14). Are there still people to whom the gospel must be preached before Jesus can come again? Paul wrote, “All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing...This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven” (Colossians 1:5, 23). On the basis of these passages we can say that Christ could come at any time.

As we see the signs of the last days of the world unfold, we eagerly await Christ's Second Coming. Our Savior is coming again—to take us to our heavenly home.

Christ will return visibly, in glory and power, accompanied by his holy angels.

Phillips Brooks wrote in his famous Christmas carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*: “How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is giv’n” (CW 66:3; ELH 137:3). When Christ came into this world the first time, he came quietly and in great humility. Yes, there was the star of Bethlehem and the appearance of the angels to the shepherds. Yet, there was little else to indicate that the Babe in the manger was the “Mighty God” (Isaiah 9:6), for he humbled himself (Philippians 2:6-8). Christ's Second Coming will be completely different. He will come with great power, glory, and majesty, accompanied by all of his holy angels. Everyone will see him.

When will Christ come again? We do not know. Jesus said we cannot know. He said, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). Didn't Christ have the knowledge of when Judgment Day would be? Yes, that divine knowledge was shared with his human nature from conception on. Paul wrote, “In whom (Christ) are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). However, from conception to the grave, Jesus did not make full or constant use of the powers which the human nature received from the divine nature. He chose to live by faith, as we must live (Psalm 22:9). However, when Jesus became alive again, he fully and constantly made use of the powers which his human nature received from the divine nature. Therefore, Jesus today does know when Judgment Day will be (cf. FC Ep VIII:16).

However, we do not know and cannot know when Jesus is coming again. All who say they do know the time of his Second Coming are false prophets. The Seventh Day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses have tried to set dates for the Second Coming of Christ, but they repeatedly have been wrong. Millennialists have indicated they have figured out when Jesus will come again. They are wrong. Paul said, “For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed” (Acts 17:31) God alone knows when Judgment Day will take place.

Jesus' Second Coming will be visible. He said, “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, 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” (Matthew 24:30-32). When Jesus was born, only a few shepherds came to see him. At his Second Coming, all people will see him. At his first coming, only Herod was afraid. At the time of his Second Coming, all unbelievers will shake in fear. The book of Revelation tells us: “They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’” (Revelation 6:16,17; see also Isaiah 2:19). At the time of Jesus' first coming, the angels heralded Christ's birth with joy. At the time of Jesus' Second Coming, his angels will gather all people before him for the final judgment.

On Judgment Day, all people will have to acknowledge Jesus as the Lord, either willingly or unwillingly. Paul said, “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10,11). As we confess in the Augsburg Confession, “Also they teach that at the consummation of the World Christ will appear for judgment, and will raise up all the dead; He will give to the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joys, but ungodly men and the devils He will condemn to be tormented without end” (AC XVII:1-3).

Christ will return only one more time, on the Last Day.

Popular premillennial belief holds that Christ will have two Second Comings. One, they say, will be at the time when Christ comes with all believers to usher in a 1000 year reign on earth. The second time Christ will come, they say, is at the end of the millennium, when Christ will raise the dead unbelievers and give them a second chance to believe in him. This idea of a two-fold coming of Christ, however, does not agree with the Bible. God’s Word teaches that Jesus will return only one time, and that will be for the final judgment.

The teaching of a two-fold coming of Christ is contrary to the teaching of the Bible that there will be one resurrection of the dead, which will take place on the last day. God had revealed to Daniel, “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2). This passage does not separate the resurrection of believers from the resurrection of unbelievers. Rather, it teaches the resurrection of believers and unbelievers will take place at the same time. Jesus said the same thing. “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:28, 29). There will be one Second Coming, when all the dead will be raised. Believers will go to live with Jesus in the new heaven and the new earth. Unbelievers will be sent away into eternal torment.

All the passages which millennialists cite to prove their idea of two resurrections ignore the clear teaching of the Bible that there will be one Second Coming of Christ with one resurrection of the dead. Premillennialists claim that 1 Thessalonians 4 teaches a rapture, a time when Christ will raise dead believers and take them and living believers out of this world so they escape a seven year period of great tribulation which will come on the earth. However, a careful reading of the chapter indicates that Paul is talking about the final judgment, not about a rapture before a seven year period called “the Great Tribulation.”

Paul is answering a question asked by the Thessalonians. They wanted to know whether those who were dead would miss out on Christ’s Second Coming. Paul indicated that dead believers would not miss out on Christ’s Second Coming. Paul wrote, “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 Thessalonians 4:16,17). Paul is describing the events of the Last Day at the Second Coming of Christ.

Reading chapter five, this becomes all the more obvious. There Paul states that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:2). It is also apparent that Peter is describing the Second Coming of Christ when he writes, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare” (2 Peter 3:10). If the universe is purged by fire, there is no room for a 1000 year period when Christ will come and rule on this earth.

The idea of two Second Comings of Christ comes from a misinterpretation of Revelation 20:4, 5, which states, “They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection.” This text does not tell us there will be two different resurrections: one for believers and one for unbelievers. It does tell us that believers reign spiritually with Christ. This coming to faith is described as the first resurrection (John 5:24,25). This is not to be confused with the resurrection of all flesh which will take place at the end of time.

The Bible teaches one Second Coming of Christ. It tells us that Jesus will come at the end of time. All the dead will be raised and gathered before Christ by his angels for the final judgment. This world in its present form will pass away, and God will make a new heaven and a new earth (2 Peter 3:13). The idea of two Second Comings of Christ is a figment of human reason and a tool the devil uses to persuade people they will have a second chance to come to faith in Christ.

We also should note that the idea of two Second Comings of Christ is at variance with what the church has confessed for close to 2000 years in the ecumenical creeds. It is also contrary to what the Lutheran Confessions teach (AC XVII:1-3).

The error of millennialism

A brief history of millennialism

The term “millennium” is derived from the Latin words *mille* (1000) and *annus* (year). The word “chiliasm” comes from the Greek *chilia* meaning 1000. Both terms refer to the belief held by some that there will be a 1000 year period during which there will be a time of great peace and prosperity on earth. In the first seven verses of Revelation 20, there are six references to a period designated as “a thousand years.” During this period, John indicated that Satan will be bound and Christ will reign. In this section John is really seeing a picture of the New Testament era. The 1000 years figuratively represent the sum total of time between the first and the second coming of Christ. The binding of Satan is when Jesus broke his power over us through his redemption and through the preaching of the gospel.

Millennialists, however, think that Revelation 20 foretells a golden age of peace and prosperity. Millennialists are divided into two principal schools. *Premillennialists* believe that Jesus will return and set in motion a millennial age. *Postmillennialists* believe that he will return at the end of the thousand years. Before his return, they say, the church will transform society. War, poverty, crime, and disease

will be eradicated. The church will enjoy unparalleled success. Christ will then come at the end of the millennium, raise the dead, and preside at the final judgment.

Where did millennialism come from? The Augsburg Confession speaks of the origin of this error. It states, “They condemn also others, who are now spreading certain Jewish opinions, that before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed” (AC XVII:5). The origins of millennialism are found in the Jewish apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature that appeared in the centuries immediately preceding and following the birth of Christ. The Jews of Jesus’ day looked forward to an earthly Messiah to help them throw off the rule of Rome. They wanted a kingdom like they had in the days of David and Solomon.

There are those who say that the Jews derived their millennialistic thought from Persian Zoroastrianism (Zoroaster was born about 660 B.C.). His teachings were prominent in the Babylonian and Persian empire at a time when the Jews were in captivity in Babylon. It is possible that those who chose to remain in Babylon could have come under this influence. An example of Jewish millennial expectations is given in the pseudepigraphical book of 1 Enoch (The pseudepigraphical books are those which are purportedly written by Old Testament believers such as Enoch). There it speaks of prosperity where vines will yield wine in abundance, each measure of seed will yield a thousand, and each measure of olives will yield ten presses of oil (cf. 1 Enoch 10:18-11:2).

Millennialists claim that from the time of the apostles to Augustine (A.D. 354-430) the church was predominantly millennial. While it is true that the early church had a lively expectation of the imminence of Christ’s coming, it is not true that the church of that period was predominantly millennialistic. There were millennialists in the early church, however: Papias (A.D. 70-155), the bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia, Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165), Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202), the Montanists (led by Montanus and two prophetesses, Prisca and Maximilla), Tertullian (A.D. 155-220), and Lactantius (A.D. 260-330), the last great literary representative of ancient millennialism. The church fathers Jerome (A.D. 331-420) and Augustine (A.D. 354-430) vigorously opposed millennialistic teaching. Augustine’s views dominated the theology of the middle ages. Occasionally, millennialism reared its head. Luther and Calvin both condemned it. Millennialism appeared in the time of Luther in the teachings of Carlstadt, Zwingli, and the Anabaptists of that day, including Thomas Muentzer and the Zwickau prophets, Nicholas Storch, Thomas Drechsel, and Marcus Stuebner. Article XVII of the Augsburg Confession condemned millennialism.

The Mennonites, who came from the Anabaptists, espoused millennialism, as did the English Congregationalists. Philip Spener (1635-1705), the father of Pietism, a movement which arose in Lutheranism in Germany, was also a millennialist. Wilhelm Loehe from Neuendettelsau, Germany, was instrumental in founding the Iowa Synod in America. He was a millennialist. Because the Iowa Synod was one of the bodies participating in the formation of the American Lutheran Church in 1930, millennialism was always tolerated in the ALC. Dr. Michael Reu (1869-1943), the foremost theologian of the Iowa Synod and author of *Lutheran Dogmatics*, was a millennialist. The Lutheran Church in America and its earlier member bodies have tolerated millennialism. It is not surprising, then, to find that the ELCA of today also views millennialism as an open question.

Mormonism also teaches millennialism. Joseph Smith, its founder, published his millennialistic views in 1842, two years before his death. The Jehovah's Witnesses also are strong millennialists. Millennialism has made deep inroads into Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism, as well as Seventh Day Adventist, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, and Holiness church bodies.

There are several reasons why fundamentalist groups have embraced millennialism with such vigor. It is, in the first place, a reaction against liberal theology which has basically removed eschatology from its theology. Fundamentalism has countered by making eschatology the center of its theology. Twentieth century liberal theologians have reinterpreted the Bible in a psychological and sociological way. Everything in Scripture was given a symbolical meaning. Fundamentalists have gone to the opposite extreme. They have advocated a literalistic interpretation of Scripture which does not allow for any figurative language. Finally, the emergence of the state of Israel (May 14, 1948) has fueled the fires of millennialism among Fundamentalists who believe that Israel is still God's chosen people.

Millennialism ignores the Bible's own rules of interpretation

The Bible is its own interpreter. We are to take it literally except in places where it indicates we are to take it in a figurative or symbolical sense. Millennialists claim they take the Bible literally. They accuse us of allegorizing or spiritualizing passages of Scripture which, they say, speak of a future righteous government on earth, Israel's restoration as a political entity, and a reign of Christ on earth for 1000 years. Millennialists, however, are guilty of crass literalism. They ignore the Bible's clear indications that it is speaking figuratively or symbolically. They take things literally when it pleases them, and they ignore the literal message of Scripture when that does not please them. We are to take Scripture literally, not literalistically. It is literalistic to claim that pictures and symbols are to be taken literally.

It is a basic principle of biblical interpretation that the interpretation of a figurative passage of Scripture dare not contradict what is said in a clear passage of Scripture. Thus, when some interpret a figurative section of Scripture to say that there will be a time when there will be no war on this earth (Isaiah 2:4), they violate the clear passages of Scripture which say that war will be with us until the end of time (Matthew 24:6,7).

Premillennialism and Postmillennialism

Premillennialists believe that Christ will return at the beginning of the 1000 years to inaugurate the millennium. Some believe that he will return secretly during the "Great Tribulation," a seven year period of great trouble on earth prior to the millennium. They believe that he will raise those who died in faith and take believers away (Rapture) from the trouble of this earth (Great Tribulation). After the seven year period of "the Great Tribulation," Christ will then begin his visible worldwide rule of righteousness and peace on earth, lasting 1000 years. They say he will make Jerusalem the center of his rule. They believe there will be a general conversion of the Jews. At the end of the 1000 years

they believe that Satan, who has been bound for 1000 years, will be released for his final assault on the church. Satan will ultimately be defeated.

Postmillennialists believe that Christ's final coming will be after the millennium. They believe the millennium itself will consist of a gradual reduction of evil, and a gradual improvement of social, political, and economic conditions on earth. This will conclude with a short time of "Great Tribulation" after which Christ will come to judge the earth and establish his eternal kingdom, with a new heaven and new earth. Postmillennialism seems to be dying out since World War II. It is evident that the world is not getting better all the time.

The presuppositions of Premillennialism

There are five basic premises that premillennialists operate with in their literalistic interpretation of Scripture. These presuppositions lead them to look for an earthly kingdom of Christ.

1. Millennialists believe that all prophecies concerning the establishment of the Messianic kingdom must be literally fulfilled. They look for Christ to rule on this earth as a king who will establish a time of blessedness for which all people have been waiting.
2. They believe there is a fundamental difference between the kingdom of God, or of heaven, and the kingdom of Christ. They believe the kingdom of God is the Church, and the kingdom of Christ is a visible and earthly kingdom with Jerusalem as its center.
3. They believe that Israel had three purposes to fulfill. Two were to produce the Savior and give us the Bible. They believe that Israel's third purpose is to be a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 43:12; 66:19). They say Israel cannot fulfill this purpose until it is converted. This is the reason Israel is so important in the teachings of modern pre-millennialism.
4. They believe that the Lord will transform the world by his almighty power so it will accept his Lordship. They say that the influence of Christ will be so universal that even the harness of the horses will bear the stamp, "Holiness to the Lord" (Zechariah 14:20).
5. They believe that the millennium is an earthly kingdom of universal blessing. They believe it will be earthly because they interpret passages which talk of the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom in terms of an earthly kingdom (i.e., Isaiah 2:4: "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.")

The events looked for by Premillennialists

The Great Tribulation and the Rapture: Premillennialists look for a seven year period of Great Tribulation to come on the earth (Daniel 9:27; Matthew 24:21). At the midpoint of this seven year period, a great dictator, the Antichrist will arise. This seven year period is described as the period of the most ghastly pestilence, bloodshed, and starvation the world has ever known. It is said that those who do not have the mark of the Antichrist on them will not be able to buy or sell (Revelation 13:16,17). The entire New Testament era is, however, a period of great tribulation for the church (Acts 14:22; Revelation 7:14).

Some believe that before the Great Tribulation begins, Christ will come invisibly to *rapture* (that is, remove) believers from this earth, so they will not have to suffer the trials of the “Great Tribulation.” They are called *Pre-tribulation Rapturists*. There are those who also believe that Christ will come in the middle of the seven years. They are called *Mid-tribulation Rapturists*. There are also those who believe that Christ will come at the end of the seven years of tribulation. They are called *Post-tribulation Rapturists*.

The idea of the Rapture is a misinterpretation of what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17. The word Paul used to describe believers being “caught up” was translated by the Vulgate (a Latin translation of the Bible made by the church father Jerome around A.D. 400) with the word *rapiemur*, which means “we shall be snatched or seized.” The word “rapture” conveys the same thought. Believers will rise to meet Christ in the air, not prior to but on the last day of the world. We could say that there will be a “rapture” then, but at the end of time. Millennialists are mistaken as to the time and nature of this “rapture.”

The first resurrection: Premillennialists take this to be the time when Christ, before the period of Great Tribulation, will raise up all who have died in faith in him up to that time, or only all the martyrs, or only a number of the elect, to reign with him. However, Scripture speaks of only one resurrection: the final resurrection of all the dead on the last day (Matthew 24:31).

The Battle of Armageddon: This is a battle premillennialists think will take place at the end of the Great Tribulation. It is said to be a judgment of God on the enemies of Israel who attacked it. Millennialists misinterpret Revelation 16:16. The context is as follows. The vision of the *seven bowls* which begins in chapter 16 is a portrayal of God’s judgment on the unbelieving world. The sixth bowl of God’s wrath is poured out on the Euphrates River. During the days of the Old Testament, the greatest threats to Israel came from this region: Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. The kings of the east as well as the kings of the whole world are summoned to do battle against the people of God by demonic spirits who come out of the mouths of the dragon, the beast (from the sea), and the false prophet (the beast from the earth). These three great enemies of the church had been described in chapters 12 and 13. The war to which these kings of the whole earth are summoned is called “the battle on the great day of God Almighty” (v. 14).

The great day spoken of is the day of judgment. This is indicated by the statement, “Behold, I

come like a thief!" John wrote, "Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon" (Revelation 16:16). This word is found only here in the New Testament, and it is not found in the Old Testament. It reproduces two Hebrew words, *Har* (mountain) and *Megiddo*, a city in the plain of Jezreel. The most famous mountain near Megiddo was Mt. Carmel, where Elijah met the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). There the Lord's prophet faced 400 prophets of Baal and 450 prophets of Asherah. The Lord's prophet was victorious. In a similar way, Satan and his forces, which outnumber the church, will be destroyed on the Last Day. Millennialists are again mistaken as to the time and nature of the event.

The restoration of Israel and the conversion of the Jews: Premillennialists believe that the establishment of Israel as an independent state in 1948 was in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies (Deuteronomy 30:1-6; Isaiah 11:11,12; Jeremiah 23:3-8; Ezekiel 37:21; Amos 9:14,15; Zechariah 10:10). It is true that God brought a remnant of his people back to Jerusalem so that his promises of the Savior might be fulfilled. After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD. 70, however, they were scattered again. The fulfillment of the prophecies of restoration for Israel is found in the church, not in the physical nation of Israel. Prof. Wilbert Gavrish stated: "The belief that the prophets are foretelling a literal return of the Jews to Palestine, a literal rebuilding of the waste cities of Judah and Israel, a literal harvesting of phenomenal crops, a literal restoration of the temple in Jerusalem with the re-institution of the Mosaic sacrifices and ceremonies is a tragic misinterpretation of the prophecies of the coming Savior and his reign of grace" (Lange, *Our Great Heritage*, III: 724).

Premillennialists also look for a mass conversion of the Jews. During the "Great Tribulation," some believe the Jews in particular will face persecution. When God pours out his wrath on the nations, it is believed that Israel will accept Christ (Romans 11:26). It should be noted that Paul does not say, "And then all Israel will be saved." He says, "And so all Israel will be saved." "All Israel" refers to God's spiritual Israel, comprised of Jews and Gentiles alike who believe in Christ.

The 1000 years: Millennialists take this number literally. Yet, they do not take other elements in Revelation 20 literally. They do not believe Satan is bound with a real chain, for he is a spirit. They focus on the reign of believers with Christ, but neglect that John speaks of the souls of those who had been beheaded reigning with Christ. The 1000 years is simply the sum total of the time of the New Testament era (10 x 10 x 10, a symbolic number representing completeness).

Premillennialists look for a visible reign of Christ on earth for these 1000 years. They look for various things. Some look for great physical prosperity on earth, "the Great Society" in perfection. Others simply look for great spiritual prosperity for the church. However, this is not what our Lord has promised for the last days. "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (Matthew 24:7). "There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:1-4). The *last days* constitute the entire New Testament era. Thus, the dream of millennialists, the desire for a heaven on earth, is a figment of their imagination. It will never happen in this world of sin.

Satan is released, Gog and Magog are gathered for battle: Premillennialists believe that toward the end of the Millennium, Satan will be released for a short time. They believe he will gather his forces for an assault on Christ and his church. Some have tried to identify Gog and Magog as Russia and China of today. Premillennialists are mistaken as to the nature of this battle. Revelation 20 does speak of Satan being released toward the close of the New Testament era. There will be an unprecedented development of antichristian forces, which Satan will gather from all parts of the world in his final assault on the church. Gog and Magog, mentioned in Ezekiel 38 and 39 and Revelation 20, are symbolic of the enemies of Christ who will join forces in an attempt to destroy God's people in the little time when Satan is released. The church will contend against forces of evil as never before, until God will bring the final judgment that will put an end to the evil of all of his enemies. This will mark the end of the world and the final judgment of Satan and his followers, who will be sent to eternal torment in hell.

The second resurrection: Some look for a resurrection of the rest of the dead to take place prior to the final judgment. Others look for a resurrection of the unbelievers so they can be given a second chance to decide for Christ. Again, the Bible speaks of one resurrection on the Last Day, the resurrection of all the dead. There will be no second chance. At the end of life in this world our destiny will be sealed (2 Corinthians 6:2; Hebrews 9:27).

Heaven, hell, or annihilation: Premillennialists do speak of heaven and hell after the final judgment. Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists deny the existence of hell. They believe that at the end of the millennium Satan and the unbelievers will be annihilated. They are wrong, for Scripture does speak of eternal, unending torment (Matthew 25:41). As for those millennialists who do look for heaven, their anticipation of it is obscured or dulled by their expectations of the millennium.

The dangers of millennialism

Millennialism is not a minor error. As with all errors, it ultimately undermines Christ and his gospel. The following are some dangers posed by millennialism.

1. It rejects the gospel as the only means of grace for all ages. Because of dispensationalism (the belief that God has divided world history into different ages during which he will test people with regard to a specific command) millennialism holds that God has a different means in each age to accomplish his purpose of salvation.
2. Millennialism has an entirely false sense of history. It makes the physical nation of Israel the center of history, not the church.
3. The gospel is often lost sight of by millennialists. Jesus and his atoning work receive short-shrift in their writings, as do the sacraments.
4. Millennialism dulls a person's spiritual awareness. There is "still time" before the real end comes. Perhaps there is a second chance.

5. Millennialism dulls a person's anticipation of heaven. As one looks at the millennial scheme, heaven is almost an afterthought.

The Christian's attitude in approaching the Last Day

The Christian will approach the Second Coming of Christ with eager anticipation. This world has been corrupted by sin. As the Lord said to Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:17-19). Job wrote, "Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble" (Job 14:1). This world is what the hymn-writer called a "vale of tears" (CW 64:2; ELH 134:2). Through faith in Christ, however, we have the assurance of a better home with Christ. We can say with Paul, "Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20).

The Christian will approach Christ's Second Coming soberly. Peter wrote, "The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled" (1 Peter 4:7). The Christian will not allow anything to cloud the mind (such as substance abuse), dull the conscience (such as repeated, willful sinning), or indulge the sinful flesh. The Christian will daily drown the Old Adam through a remembrance of baptism. As Paul wrote, "Count yourselves alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires" (Romans 6:12). God's love in Christ will move us to say "no" to sin as a way of saying "thank you" to Jesus for all that he did for us.

The Christian will approach Christ's Second Coming with watchfulness. Jesus completed the parable of the Ten Virgins with the words, "Keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour" (Matthew 25:13). We will be mindful of the three enemies which attack our faith daily. The Bible tells us that the devil is stalking us like a lion, waiting to devour us (1 Peter 5:8). Peter encouraged us, "Resist him, standing firm in the faith" (1 Peter 5:9). The world is eager to deceive us. John warned, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lusts of his eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world" (1 John 2:15,16). John reminded us, "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:17). Our own sinful flesh is eager to mislead us. Jesus warned, "The spirit is willing, but the body (flesh) is weak" (Matthew 26:41). He encouraged, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation" (Matthew 26:41).

We will await Christ's Second Coming busily doing the work he has given us to do. Paul warned the Thessalonians that they were not to be idle while waiting for Christ to come again. They were to earn their living and "never tire of doing what is right" (2 Thessalonians 3:13). Christ has also given us another command that will occupy our time as we wait for him to come. He has given us the command and the high privilege of proclaiming the good news of salvation to a world that is lost in sin (Matthew 28:18-20). In this respect the early church set an example, as we read, "Those who had been scattered preached the word everywhere they went" (Acts 8:4).

Finally, we will await Christ's Second Coming in faith. How can we sinners ever stand before the Judgment of a holy and just God? We have sinned and deserve only God's just and eternal punishment. Yet, God still loves us and desires our salvation. He sent Jesus into this world to save us from our sins. Jesus kept all of God's commandments for all people. He suffered the punishment for the sins of all people. He died and rose again, conquering death for us. Through faith in Jesus we receive as our own the righteousness which he won for all people of the world. Not only has Christ brought us to faith through our baptism, he also gives us his assurance that he will preserve us in faith in him and bring us to himself in heaven. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, promises, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one" (John 10:28-30). Because of all that Jesus has done and will do for us, we may confidently look forward to Christ's Second Coming. Even then he will be coming as our Savior to take us to live with him forever.

We reject the following errors:

1. That we can know the time when Christ will come again.
2. That there will be two Second Comings of Christ, one to usher in a millennium, and one at the end of the millennium (Premillennialism).
3. That Christ will come at the end of a millennium in which things will get better and better on earth (Postmillennialism).
4. That there will be a seven year period of Great Tribulation and a rapture of believers to spare them from this Great Tribulation.
5. That unbelievers will be annihilated rather than being sent to hell.

IV. EAGERLY AWAIT THE SAVIOR EVEN THOUGH YOU MUST FACE DIVINE JUDGMENT

Who will be judged on Judgment Day?

The Bible clearly teaches that all human beings without exception will be judged: believers and unbelievers, the living and the dead. Also the devil and evil angels will be judged. The Greek word for the English word "to judge" includes the meanings "to separate" or "to make a decision."

Matthew writes: "All nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left" (Matthew 25:32,33). It is clear from the context that the "sheep" refers to believers and the "goats" refers to unbelievers. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul says the very same truth. When he mentions: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:10), he includes himself, the believers in Corinth as well as all people.

The Apostles' Creed proclaims, "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." Those who died before Judgment Day will also be gathered before Jesus on Judgment Day. He says:

“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in the graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:28, 29). No one will be overlooked! No one can escape from judgment!

Besides all human beings, the devil and his angels are subjects of the Judgment. Peter writes, “God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment” (2 Peter 2:4; cf. Jude 6). Before his appearance to Mary Magdalene on the first Easter Sunday, Jesus in his glorified body descended into hell, not to give a second chance to be saved, but to proclaim his victory to “the spirits in prison – both human and demonic spirits – whose severe sufferings had begun” (Jeske, *The People’s Bible: James, Peter, John, Jude*: 113). This event is just like a preview of Judgment Day. According to Jesus, the eternal fire in hell was originally prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41).

Who will be the Judge?

Matthew 25:31-46 clearly teaches us who the Judge will be. On Judgment Day, the Son of Man (Jesus) gathers all the nations and separates them one from another. Then he gives believers the kingdom prepared for them since the creation of the world. On the other hand, he sends unbelievers away into the eternal fire.

Jesus’ disciples correctly understood Jesus’ teaching about who the Judge would be. After the first Pentecost Day, the Lord sent Peter to Cornelius and his family and friends to tell them about their Savior. He told them about Jesus’ death and resurrection. He told them that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name (Acts 10:43). He also said that God had appointed Jesus as judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42).

John writes: “And he (the Father) has given him (Jesus) authority to judge” (John 5:27). As quoted previously, Paul writes: “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:10). Christians have confessed for many centuries in the second article of the Apostle’s Creed that “He (Jesus) ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.”

But we cannot say that the role of judgment is completely separated from God the Father. Jesus and the Father are not identical persons, but are one in divine essence (John 10:30). Jesus himself says: “The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22). Jesus in his human nature was given the authority to judge by the Father. His judgment is just and also in complete agreement with the heart of the Father, since “he can do only what he sees his Father doing” (John 5:19) and since he seeks not to please himself but the Father (John 5:30).

The Bible also tells us that Christians together with Jesus will judge the world and the evil angels. On the night that he was betrayed Jesus said to his disciples, “I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:29,30). Paul says in his letter to the Christians in Corinth:

“Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? Do you not know that we will judge angels?” (1 Corinthians 6:2,3). In heaven, Christians’ thoughts and decisions will perfectly harmonize with those of Jesus. “They will judge the world and the evil angels, inasmuch as they cooperate in Christ’s decisions and his verdict” (Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*: 631). We are not told the details about this authority, but we can be sure of this promise and rejoice in this great honor. This great honor moves us to judge our brothers and sisters rightly in this earthly life too.

The basis of judgment and the use of evidence in the judging

The basis of judgment

According to the law every human being is guilty without exception. If the basis of judgment were the law, Christians would also have to fear the Day of Judgment. When Paul says: “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad,” he refers to the law (2 Corinthians 5:10; cf. Matthew 12:36,37; Romans 14:12). But Jesus will not judge the believer by the law. If the basis of judgment were the law, Jesus’ sufferings and death to pay for all the sins of all people and his resurrection to prove that he finished the redemption would be meaningless (Mark 8:31; Romans 4:25; 2 Corinthians 5:18,19; Hebrews 2:14,15).

The basis of judgment that Jesus will use is whether a person has faith in the gospel or not. Having taught Nicodemus about spiritual rebirth, Jesus also taught him the basis of judgment, saying: “Whoever believes in him (Jesus the Son) is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (John 3:18). Jesus’ words in Mark 16:16 tell us of the very same basis for judgment. “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (cf. John 5:24; 12:47,48).

The use of evidence in the judging

It is true that there are some passages, such as Matthew 25:31-46, which seem to tell us that our salvation depends on our good deeds. Jesus says in John 5:29: “Those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.” James 2:24 says: “You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.” These passages, however, are not in contradiction to the basis of judgment and salvation, which were mentioned in the sections before.

In order not to be confused by the above two passages, let’s remind ourselves of the context and the circumstances of those words. For instance, when James wrote the letter, the readers knew that forgiveness and eternal life were God’s free gifts through faith in Jesus. But some of them were tempted to think that they did not need to do any good works. Therefore, James emphasized that such a faith without good works was dead and was not true faith. This is not his idea. Moved by the Holy Spirit, the psalmist wrote about the characteristics of believers. “But his delight is in the law (Word) of the Lord, and on his law (Word) he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither” (Psalm 1:2,3a). Jesus also teaches in a parable

that God expects believers to bear the fruits of faith (Luke 13:6-9).

Some may think that the “fruits of faith” means outreach in the form of mission work or some kind of services to their neighbors, or perhaps devout prayers, etc. But even when a deed seems to be a small thing to us, if the deed flows from faith in Jesus, then it becomes a wonderful service and worship of God. Paul encourages us, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). Of course, a confession of faith in word or deed is a good work, as Paul writes: “‘I believe; therefore I have spoken.’ With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak” (2 Corinthians 4:13).

Even those who are familiar with the Bible and who are zealous members of a visible church will stand at the left hand of Jesus’ judgment seat, unless they believe in Jesus as their own Savior from the power of Satan, sin, and death (Matthew 7:15-23). On the other hand, even those like Zacchaeus, the tax collector, the Samaritan woman, and one of the two crucified criminals will stand at the right hand of Jesus as a free gift received through faith (Luke 19:1-10; John 4:3-29,39; Luke 23:40-43). These words, which refer to being placed at the right hand of Jesus, picture being declared not guilty.

God really wants his believers to do good works in his sight. But good works are “not the reason for the sentence which is pronounced. They are rather the public evidence of that faith whereby they became the sheep of Christ” (Koehler, *Christian Doctrine*: 307).

For the believers the sentence of condemnation, which under the Law they had deserved by their sins, is suspended and changed into a sentence of pardon and justification, because by faith they have appropriated to themselves the saving merits of Christ. Their sins are not investigated and published; they are not even mentioned. The Judge does not look at the rags of their sins, but sees only the perfect garment of righteousness, which He offered them in the Gospel, and which they put on by faith. (Koehler, *Op. Cit.* 306)

The reality and eternity of condemnation in hell

The reality of hell

We believe and teach that hell really exists. The existence of hell is not a made-up story. It is a dreadful reality. After his transfiguration, Jesus taught the disciples about the severe suffering of hell by quoting Isaiah 66:24. “Their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched” (Mark 9:43-48; cf. Matthew 18:8, 9). Jesus’ quotation from Isaiah 66: 24 testifies that the faithful in the Old Testament times knew and believed in the existence of hell (cf. Psalm 139:8b). Jesus teaches about it also in Luke 16: 19-31. There are two places after death: heaven and hell. And Jesus’ descent into hell is the strongest testimony of the existence of hell. If the teaching of hell in the Bible had been made-up stories, Jesus would not have descended into hell to proclaim his victory (1 Peter 3:18-20).

The eternity of condemnation in hell

The punishment of hell will never come to an end, and those who are in hell will never have even a temporary rest. Their souls and bodies suffer eternally. Isaiah's words in Isaiah 66:24 and Jesus' words in Mark 9:43-48 teach us not only about the reality of hell, but also about the eternity of condemnation in hell. Paul said to the Christians in Thessalonica, "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" (2 Thessalonians 1:8, 9). John writes: "And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Revelation 20:10).

Therefore, together with our faithful church fathers, we confess: "At the consummation of the world Christ will appear for judgment, and will raise up all the dead; He will give to the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joys, but ungodly men and all the devils He will condemn to be tormented without end" (AC XVII:1-3).

The popular errors: The denial of hell or limiting the duration of hell

The *Jehovah's Witnesses* deny the immortality of the soul after death and insist that the punishment of unbelievers in hell is the eternal extinction. The *Anabaptists* think that the punishment of unbelievers, the devil, and his angels will come to an end. The *Roman Catholic Church* teaches that there is a "halfway point" between heaven and hell called purgatory. According to them, Jesus' death paid only the eternal debt for the sins of all people, and people need to pay for the temporal debt of their sins by doing good works and by suffering in purgatory.

The *Restorationists* deny hell by insisting that everything will be restored again as it was in the Garden of Eden. They teach: "The future punishment is not retributive but remedial and will result in the salvation of all men and, as some hold, of the evil angels" (Mueller, *Op. Cit.* 638). The *Annihilationists* teach: "The wicked will be completely destroyed either at the Judgment or later" (*Ibid:* 638).

The Christian's attitude in anticipating standing before the judgment seat of Christ

Christians will be able to stand before the judgment seat of Christ without fear or despair, because of his redemptive work. They are dear children of the Father and dear brothers of Christ (Galatians 3:26; John 20:17). As a free gift through faith, each of them has been clothed with a suitable garment to stand before the Judge – the garment of salvation or the robe of righteousness (Isaiah 61:10; Matthew 22:9-13; Galatians 3:27). Together with the prophet Isaiah, all those who believe in Jesus as his or her Savior can rejoice in their Lord. Like the apostle John, they will have confidence on Judgment Day, because in this world they are like Christ (1 John 4:17).

However, the previous passages are not a license for a Christian to live a sinful life in this world. The apostle Paul said to the Christians in Rome: "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so

that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:1, 2). To go on sinning so that grace may increase is not the attitude of a Christian but of an unbeliever. Christians are not slaves of sin. Rather, they are slaves of righteousness and want to serve the Lord with joy and love by using their time, money, and talents, etc.

After Jesus' ascension, two angels appeared and rebuked the disciples, saying, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?" (Acts 1:11). To keep looking into the sky waiting for the Last Day is not what Jesus wants his disciples to do. The angels came to tell them, "Go back to your daily life! Go back to your mission work!" Every Christian has the Lord's command: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15). Christians are the light of the world. Jesus wants them to shine the light of salvation in this sin-darkened world (Matthew 5:14-16).

The passing of time shows that we are getting closer to the Last Day. Let us keep our eyes of faith fixed on Jesus and seek his kingdom, and let us use the means of grace so that our faith is strengthened and sustained (Matthew 6:33; Colossians 3:1,2). Because of Jesus' blood and righteousness, we will not fail to be declared righteous before the judgment seat. We will be able joyfully to await the Second Coming of our Savior, the Lord Jesus. We will be able joyfully and with peace filled hearts to anticipate standing before the judgment seat of Christ. Without fear we can pray, "Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20).

We reject the following errors:

1. That the teaching of hell is a made-up story or that hell does not really exist.
2. That there is a "halfway point" between heaven and hell called purgatory.
3. That the punishment in hell is the eternal extinction or that the wicked will be completely destroyed either at the Judgment or later.
4. That the punishment in hell will come to an end.
5. That the punishment in hell is not retributive but remedial and will result in the salvation of all men and of the evil angels.

V. EAGERLY AWAIT THE SAVIOR – SINCE YOU KNOW YOU ARE INHERITING ETERNAL LIFE IN HEAVEN

"The best is yet to come!" This is what a bumper sticker says that some Christians put on their car. They're giving witness to their faith. They are expressing that life here on earth is merely temporary. Their destination is eternal salvation. That is where their thoughts are focused. They already possess the citizenship of heaven. Therefore the Apostle Paul calls out to them, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Colossians 3:2).

Eternal life is given to us through Christ

In 1 John it is written about our Lord Christ: “He is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20). In a different passage the Lord himself says, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). That shows that God gave us his Son so that we may be saved from eternal death. Because we could not free ourselves from the curse of sin, God opened the way for us through Jesus Christ. He let his Son die on the cross for us so that we may live in peace with God eternally. That is why it is stated: “Who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life” (John 6:40). Everything depends on this Savior, especially our future. The Apostle John summarizes it as follows: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

Holy Scripture depicts eternal life with different terms: e.g., God’s eternal kingdom (2 Peter 1:11), heavenly kingdom (2 Timothy 4:18), paradise (Luke 23:43), eternal or never-ending heritage (Hebrews 9:15; 1 Peter 1:4), eternal salvation (Hebrews 1:14). These are only some examples. Often eternal life is called heaven.

The visible and invisible heavens

Christians know that “heaven” can stand for two completely different things, one of which is the visible realm – with the blue sky and clouds that we see above us. Even the universe, which is not fully discovered yet, is part of it. This realm is part of God’s creation. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years’” (Genesis 1:1,14).

The visible heaven has been subjected to futility (Romans 8:20). It is stated already in the Old Testament: “In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them” (Psalm 102:25,26). The Lord Christ confirms that when he foretells not just the end of the earth but also of the visible heaven, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35).

The other meaning of the word “heaven” stands for God’s invisible kingdom. Our mind cannot fathom the true meaning of it. When the Bible on occasion talks about heaven being up above and hell being down below, it does this to make clear the great distance between the two. We must not just look for God’s invisible realm above our heads. It surrounds us everywhere and at all times. However, we cannot see it. “You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me” (Psalm 139:5).

When Jesus departed our visible world at his ascension, a cloud took him away before the eyes of the disciples. Something similar happened when Elijah was taken into heaven. God’s world remains hidden from our eyes. It is as if God lives in another dimension. We can only think in terms of space and time. God exists outside of these limitations.

In summary: “There is not just a visible, explorable world with a starry sky and earth. The visible world is only a part of the entire reality – the smaller and preliminary part at that. God’s invisible world, which is beyond all human access and evades all human thirst of knowledge, is the crucial and lasting

part of reality” (J. Huebener, *Wohnt Gott im Himmel?*; 1967).

With what is heaven to be compared?

As humans, we tend to compare the heavenly glory with our earthly reality. We simply imagine it to be a better continuation of the present. These were the assumptions of Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries. However, Jesus said, “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven” (Matthew 22:30).

Our experiences in this sin-stricken world and our words are not enough to fully express the glory of God’s eternal kingdom. One notices that the Bible often describes heaven in terms of what will not be there. It is stated in John’s Revelation: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4). Nothing cursed or impure will be found any longer in God’s new world (Revelation 21:27).

But there are also positive descriptions: The Lord said to one of the two thieves who were crucified with him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). John’s Revelation compares salvation with paradise as well: “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7b). However, before we can return to a life in paradise, sin must be done away with, which drove us out of the paradise of Eden. This took place through the vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ, who poured out his blood as the atonement for our sins. Whoever washes his robe clean in the blood of the Lamb also gains the right to eat from the tree of life (Revelation 7:14; 22:14). He may live in fellowship with God forever. No longer does anything stand between him and the holy God.

Salvation is not merely a state of mind

In his gospel, John talks about the fact that the redeemed will live in the house of God. In this house there are many rooms. Our Lord Christ himself is preparing them for us and is waiting for us there: “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:2, 3). In Hebrews, salvation is portrayed as the *heavenly fatherland*: “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:13-16).

All this shows that heaven is not just a euphoria or a certain state of mind, as some modern theologians maintain. In the Lord’s Prayer, we address God every day as our Father “who art in heaven.” The Lord Christ promises, “and where I am, my servant also will be” (John 12:26; 17:24). Therefore we can imagine heaven as the place where God dwells. But Holy Scripture does not tell us

exactly where this place is. We probably would not be able to imagine it. For it is certain that we do not have an enduring city here on earth and therefore are looking for the city that is to come (Hebrews 13:14). Through the Apostle John, God promises us this when he says, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Revelation 21:1,2).

Of what the eternal salvation consists

This has been the source of much speculation in the various religions. The Native Americans dream of the eternal hunting grounds, where they will never again have to hunger. The Koran describes heaven as a place of pleasure for the senses. Beautiful women without number and luxurious food await the believing Muslim. Even some atheists hope for a state of eternal happiness after death (c.f. Elisabeth Kuebler-Ross, *Interviews mit Sterbenden*).

Holy Scripture tells us this: enjoying eternal salvation we will see God as he is and be fully in his presence forever. This is the true essence of heaven. What is already now beginning in us through faith will then be brought to completion. Seeing will follow the time of believing. The Apostle Paul says, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Job confesses, “Then in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another” (Job 19:26,27).

In this world, we observe how God acts in nature or history. But most of all, he reveals himself in his Word. In eternity, the veil will be lifted that presently darkens our knowledge. Then we will be able to see God face to face. “We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

This will only be possible because sin will then no longer be separating us from God. Through Christ’s work of redemption, the image of God will be restored in us, which was shattered through the fall into sin. David sings about this in his psalm, “And I—in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness” (Psalm 17:15).

Seeing God causes an inexpressible, *perfect joy* to grow in the hearts of the redeemed. Their mouths will be full of laughter and their tongues full of praise (Psalm 126:2). The Lord Christ promises us, “but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy” (John 16:22). This also means that in the resurrection we will receive a new body, which will no longer be marked by suffering, affliction, and frailness (Revelation 21:4).

Same salvation for everyone – and yet differences

The same salvation and complete happiness is promised to all believers. It is in the nature of this salvation that it cannot be more or less perfect. There is no difference. Nevertheless, the Bible speaks of different degrees of glory in some passages. Jesus speaks of the different rewards of the servants in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:21). Daniel prophesies that at the resurrection, “Those who are wise

will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever” (Daniel 12:3).

Martin Luther writes, “However, it is also true, as we shall hear later, that there will be distinctions made also in yonder life, depending upon how a person worked and lived here. For instance, since St. Paul was an apostle and Samuel and Isaiah prophets, and so forth, these enjoy greater glory than others as men who did more and suffered more in their offices” (LW 28:173).

Still, these differences will not cause any envy. They simply serve to increase God’s praise. The greater reward does not rely on any human achievements in this life but rather on God’s kindness. Who then should be envious when God is so gracious (Matthew 20:15)? The Apostle Paul confesses, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10).

A glimpse of eternal glory – a comfort in this life

It is a great comfort for Christians that we do not obtain salvation on the basis of our own efforts. The Lord Christ has firmly promised it to his own, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27,28). We can confess with Luther, “For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation” (Small Catechism V:6). Whoever receives the forgiveness that has been gained by our Savior has eternal life. Together with Peter we are able to rejoice and say, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:3,4).

A glimpse of the eternal salvation, however, is also to help us order and conduct our lives correctly. Since our earthly life is just a short and temporary station before eternity, we should set our minds on our destination (Colossians 3:2). In this way, we are kept from backsliding into our old sins or becoming indifferent.

But most of all, the prospect of eternity is to fill us with joyful anticipation. Just as we look forward to our next vacation or to retirement, we can look forward to eternal glory with our heavenly Father. The many figurative pictures in the Bible serve to give us a foretaste of this joy. For instance, the kingdom of God is compared to a wedding celebration. Finally whenever hardship and misery give us pain, we are to seek comfort and help in God’s Word and sacraments. Our heavenly Father wants to lead us into his eternal home through the good news of salvation through Christ. For we can be assured that “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

Our hymns, in particular, regularly place eternal salvation before our eyes. Especially their last stanzas often lift our eyes to the coming glory and joy. They invite us to join in praise to our heavenly Father and in joyful anticipation.

Now through his Son doth shine
The Father's grace divine.
Death o'er us had reigned
Through sin and vanity;
He for us obtained
Eternal joy on high.
May we praise him there!
May we praise him there!

Oh, where shall joy be found?
Where but on heav'nly ground?
Where the angels singing
With all his saints unite,
Sweetest praises bringing
In heav'nly joy and light.
Oh, that we were there!
Oh, that we were there! (CW 3,4; ELH 135:3,4)

