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IS CHRIST'S COMING NEAR?

Or need we ask that question?

Is it rational for Christians at the threshold of the twenty-first century still to live in the expectation of Christ's imminent return? Have not many Christians through the centuries proclaimed, "'Tis almost time for the Lord to come"?

Some view the apparent delay as a reason for either neglecting or rejecting belief in the Second Coming. To abandon such a belief, however, means not only to reject one of the clearest biblical teachings but to empty our present life of meaning, motivation, and hope. Faith in Jesus without the expectation of His coming resembles a flight of stairs leading nowhere.

The solution to the apparent delay of Christ's return must be found, not in abandoning such a fundamental biblical teaching, but in reexamining what Scripture teaches regarding the time element of the Second Advent.

Time and the Signs

The New Testament speaks of the Second Advent as being not only imminent but also possibly distant. For example, Jesus' prediction of the proclamation of the gospel in the whole world (Matt. 24:14) presupposes the elapsing of considerable time.

Paul implies a sense of distance in his warning to the Thessalonians "not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited," because "that day will not come, unless" certain developments

first occur (2 Thess. 2:2, 3). John suggests distance in his vision of the two witnesses and the woman, both of whom are promised a period of 1260 days (Rev. 11:3; 12:6). How can we resolve this apparent tension between

tion that ought to be made today, Christ gave signs that have found a degree of fulfillment in every age because they were intended to nourish the hope and strengthen the faith of believers in every age.

Should Christians today look for fulfillment of the end-time signs given by Christ in His Olivet discourse? Have not the signs been witnessed to some degree in every generation? Their past fulfillment does not negate their present relevance.

Scripture views history as progressing toward its consummation. Every passing day brings us closer to Christ's return. Paul could see that "salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand" (Rom. 13:11, 12). How much more reason have we, then, 19 centuries later, to see in the fulfillment of the Advent signs, indications that the day of Christ's coming is nearer than it has ever been!

Sign of Divine Grace

Among all the signs of the end given by Christ, the preaching of the gospel throughout the world stands out as the only sign connected to the end. While with regard to antichrists, wars, and calamities, it is said, "but the end is not yet" (Matt. 24:6), concerning the preaching of the gospel it is clearly stated, "and then the end will come" (verse 14).

A look at Christian expansion during the past 19 centuries indicates that



WIDE WORLD PHOTO

The Bhagwan Rajneesh: A sign of the end?

the imminent and yet possibly distant return of Christ?

Such a tension discourages time calculations and encourages constant preparation. If Christ had made it possible to calculate exactly either the nearness or the remoteness of His return, then any preparation would have been conditioned by that date. Aware of the human tendency to postpone till tomorrow the prepara-

BY SAMUELE BACCHIOCCHI

today for the first time the gospel is being proclaimed to practically "every nation and tribe and tongue and people" (Rev. 14:6). Christianity has grown from 1 million members by A.D. 100 in a population of 181 million (representing 0.6 percent of mankind) to 1,433 million by 1980 in a population of 4,374 million (33 percent of mankind). The percentage of the evangelized population of the world—that is, people who have become aware of the gospel—was 28 percent by the year 100, 68 percent by 1980, and should reach 80 to 90 percent by the year 2,000.

More impressive than the numerical growth of Christianity during the past 20 centuries is its internationalization during our century. Jesus predicted that "this gospel . . . will be preached . . . as a testimony to all nations," yet by 1900 Christianity (and Seventh-day Adventism) was still a predominately Western religion.

By 1980 only 33 percent of Christians in general and 21 percent of Adventists lived in the Western world. During our century, Christianity has been transformed from a Western, White man's religion to an international, multiracial religion. The internationalization of Christianity is reflected in the translations and distribution of the Bible during this century.

From 537 languages by 1900, the Bible has become available, in whole or in part, in 1,811 languages by 1980, representing 96 percent of the world's population.

Today for the first time a few powerful shortwave radio stations are capable of beaming the gospel to practically every country around the globe. The fulfillment of this sign gives us reason to believe that Christ's return "is near, at the very gates" (Matt. 24:33).

Opposition to God

A second kind of end-time sign given by Christ is increased opposition to God. We shall consider only two examples of this.

Messianic Pretenders. Twice in His Olivet discourse Christ warns against

the appearance of "false Christs and false prophets" (Matt. 24:4, 5, 23, 24), not only in the context of the destruction of Jerusalem (verses 15-22) but also in connection with the Second Advent (verse 27).

The appearance today of self-appointed prophets and messiahs who pretend to offer new ways of salvation is, as *Christianity Today* calls it, "a reality that has staggered our imaginations."

Impersonal "Messiahs." Christ's prediction of "false Christs and false prophets" finds a more subtle and pervasive fulfillment today through impersonal "messiahs" such as science, technology, and secularistic ideologies like communism, humanism, and materialism. These ideologies offer the kind of messianic hope for a better tomorrow that in the days of Jesus was based upon the expected coming of a personal deliverer.

In the Soviet Union, Christians have fallen from 83 percent of the popula-

Faith in Jesus without the expectation of His coming resembles a flight of stairs leading nowhere.

tion in 1900 to 36 percent today. For many Communists, Marx or Lenin plays a messianic role. In North America and Western Europe almost 3 million Christians every year give up their faith, accepting instead secular and humanistic ideologies as their hope for a better tomorrow.

Closely related to end-time messianic pretenders and false teachers (antichrists) is the sign of apostasy. Christ connects apostasy ("many will fall away" [Matt. 24:10]) with the appearance of "false prophets" (verses

11, 12), obviously because often the former is caused by the latter. Paul warns the Thessalonians that Christ "will not come, unless the rebellion comes first" (2 Thess. 2:3). "The rebellion" is a translation of the Greek *hē apostasia*, from which derives our English word apostasy.

Apostasy today. Is the final, pre-Advent apostasy taking place in Christendom today? While on the one hand Christianity has experienced during this century massive gains in the Third World, thus becoming for the first time a global religion, on the other hand it has suffered massive losses in the Western and Communist worlds. Secularism, humanism, and communism have become so pervasive in Europe that some analysts speak of "the post-Christian era."

Increased Wickedness

Closely related and causally connected to the final apostasy is the sign of increased social wickedness prior to Christ's return: "Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold" (Matt. 24:12, NIV).

Crime today is skyrocketing out of control throughout the world. U.S. News & World Report states: "From London to Moscow to Johannesburg, crime is fast becoming a major menace that is changing the way in which many people live. Just as in the United States, crime is on the rise in almost every country around the world."

Christ pointed to the sexual depravity of the days of Noah and Lot to characterize the age preceding His return. The sexual revolution of our times offers an unprecedented fulfillment of this Advent sign.

This frightening intensification of human rebellion against God points to the impending judgment that Christ will execute upon evildoers. □

*Unless otherwise noted, Bible texts in this article are from the Revised Standard Version.

To be concluded

Samuele Bacchiocchi is professor of theology and church history at Andrews University. This article was adapted from his book *The Advent Hope for Human Hopelessness*.