

CONSISTENT BIBLICAL FUTURISM

Part IV

by Thomas Ice

When one looks at the New Testament Epistles for specific prophecy relating to the current church age, there is virtually nothing to be found. The church age is not a time of specific prophetic fulfillment and does not have a specific prophetic countdown or timetable, as does Israel and her 70 weeks of years prophecy (Dan. 9:24-27). The only specific future event prophesied for the church age is its end found in the rapture of the church event (John 14:1-3; 1 Thess. 4:13-18). There are general descriptions that give us an idea of the trends of the church age, but there is not specific prophecy like that which is found in abundance to describe the tribulation period. The church age mainly has specific prophecy about its beginning (Acts 1 and 2) and its ending (1 Thess. 4:13-18). The general admonition that "evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tim. 4:13) is characteristic of the Lord's revelation relating to the church age.

THE COURSE OF THE CHURCH AGE

The current church age, in which believers live today, does have a general course or direction in which this dispensation is moving. First, James says in Acts 15:14: "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name." The purpose of the present church age is to be a time of great Gentile salvation. This does not mean that there will not be Jewish believers during this age, because there is a remnant of Jacob throughout the church age which is added to Gentile ingathering in order to form the body of Christ. Ephesians chapter two teaches us that the Lord is taking the Jewish remnant and joining them with Gentile converts into one new man in which Jewish and Gentile believers are one, thus, coequal with Christ during the church age. However, when the last elect Gentile is saved whom the Father has chosen to be part of the body of Christ, then, as Paul says, "the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom. 11:25). Fullness in this context has the connotation of "full number of Gentiles." This means that when that last Gentile is converted to Christ, His body will be complete and the rapture will occur, ending the current church age.

The course of this age is given to Christians primarily by Christ's parables in Matthew 13 providing insight into the course of this dispensation. Since Matthew 13 surveys this present age in its relation to the postponement of the kingdom, the parables cover the period of time between Christ's two advents—His first and second comings. This includes the tribulation, second coming, and final judgment, after the rapture, but nevertheless includes an important overview of our present era. Therefore, the items that relate to the end of the age in Matthew 13 do not apply to the church age, since our dispensation will end via the rapture, while the broader inter-advent age continues with the tribulation and Christ's physical return to planet earth at the end of that seven-year period. How does Matthew 13 depict this age?

The parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-23) teaches that this age will be characterized by the sowing of the gospel seed onto different kinds of soil. The sowing of the seed will receive opposition from the world, the flesh, and the devil, resulting in various responses to the gospel message. The parable of the tares (Matt. 13:24-30) teaches that the true sowing will be imitated by a false counter-sowing, which will result in a side-by-side development as a result of the two sowings. Judgment at the end of the

tribulation, at least seven-years after the conclusion of the church age will separate the two with the wheat entering the Messianic Kingdom and the tares being excluded. The parable of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31–32) teaches that there will be an abnormal external growth of Christendomⁱ until it becomes a monstrosity, which will become a resting place for birds, who are pictured as agents of Satan. Christendom has been for many years and remains the largest religion in the world today. The parable of the leaven (Matt. 13:33–43) teaches that false teach, represented by leaven, will be introduced into this age resulting in corruption of doctrine. False teaching will grow until it permeates all branches of Christendom. The parable of the hidden treasure (Matt. 13:44) teaches that the treasure hidden is the field representing Israel. It teaches that there will be a remnant that will be saved out of Israel who is scattered around the world during the church age. Yet, there will be Jews coming to Jesus the Messiah during the current dispensation. Finally, the parable of the pearl of great price (Matt. 13:45) teaches that since the pearl originates in the sea and when the sea is used symbolically it represents Gentiles. Thus, the main point of this parable is that Gentiles will also come to a saving knowledge of Jesus as their Messiah. The last two parables in Matthew 13 do not relate to the church age, thus, they will not be dealt with.

THE LAST DAYS FOR THE CHURCH

The New Testament clearly speaks about the last days for the church. Note the use of the following terms that speak of the end of the current church age: “*latter days*” (1 Tim. 4:1); “*last days*” (2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; Jam. 5:3; 2 Pet. 3:3); “*last times*” (1 Pet. 1:20; Jude 18); “*last time*” (1 Pet.1:5; 1 John 2:18). A number of New Testament Epistles clearly speak of the condition within Christendom near the end of the church age. Interestingly, virtually all of these comments come from the Epistles written shortly before the death of each Apostle writing (i.e., during the last days of the various Apostles), as if to emphasize the dangers latent during the church’s last days. The following is a list of the seven major passages that deal with the last days for the church: 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-5; 4:3-4; James 5:1-8; 2 Peter 2:1-22; 3:3-6; Jude 1-25. Every one of these passages emphasizes over and over again that the great characteristic of the end of the church age will be that of *apostasy*. Pentecost concludes: “This condition at the close of the age is seen to coincide with the state within the Laodicean Church, before which Christ must stand to seek admission. In view of its close it is not surprising that the age is called an ‘evil age’ in Scripture.”ⁱⁱ

The New Testament pictures the condition within the professing church at the end of the age by a system of denials.

- Denial of **GOD**—Luke 17:26; 2 Timothy 3:4-5
- Denial of **CHRIST**—1 John 2:18; 4:3; 2 Peter 2:6
- Denial of **CHRIST’S RETURN**—2 Peter 3:3-4
- Denial of **THE FAITH**—1 Timothy 4:1-2; Jude 3
- Denial of **SOUND DOCTRINE**—2 Timothy 4:3-4
- Denial of **THE SEPARATED LIFE**—2 Timothy 3:1-7
- Denial of **CHRISTIAN LIBERTY**—1 Timothy 4:3-4
- Denial of **MORALS**—2 Timothy 3:1-8,13; Jude 18
- Denial of **AUTHORITY**—2 Timothy 3:4ⁱⁱⁱ

Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder and first president of Dallas Theological Seminary, characterized the last days for the church in the following way:

A very extensive body of Scripture bears on the last days for the Church. Reference is to a restricted time at the very end of, and yet wholly within, the present age. Though this brief period immediately precedes the great tribulation and in some measure is a preparation for it, these two times of apostasy and confusion—though incomparable in history—are wholly separate the one from the other. Those Scriptures which set forth the last days for the Church give no consideration to political or world conditions but are confined to the Church itself. These Scriptures picture men as departing from the faith (1 Tim. 4:1-2). There will be a manifestation of characteristics which belong to unregenerate men, though it is under the profession of "a form of godliness" (cf. 2 Tim. 3:1-5). The indication is that, having denied the power of the blood of Christ (cf. 2 Tim. 3:5 with Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:23-24; 2 Tim. 4:2-4), the leaders in these forms of righteousness will be unregenerate men from whom nothing more spiritual than this could proceed (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14).^{iv}

The clear course of the last days for the church consists of constant warnings to the believer to be on guard against doctrinal defection, otherwise known as apostasy. Apostasy means "the abandonment or renunciation of a belief or principle."^v When one scans the New Testament for how apostasy or departure from the faith is used, we see that it relates to departure from sound doctrine and godly behavior. Such a characteristic provides for the Christian today a clear sign that the end of this present age is near.

CONCLUSION

Even though specific prophecy is not given concerning the present church age, we have seen that the New Testament does paint a general picture of the course of this age. We learn that the purpose of this age is to preach the gospel throughout the world, knowing that there will be various responses to the message. As the church starts out small, like a mustard seed, it will nevertheless grow into a large tree where birds will come and dwell in its branches. Thus, the larger that Christendom grows the more apostate it will become. So we see that these general trends will continue until that last person is saved and then the rapture will end the church age, preparing the way for Antichrist and the tribulation. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Christendom refers to "the worldwide body or society of Christians." Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, eds., *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2004), s. v. Christendom.

ⁱⁱ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), p. 155.

ⁱⁱⁱ Taken from Pentecost, *Things To Come*, p. 155.

^{iv} Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 Vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), vol. IV, p. 375.

^v Soanes and Stevenson, *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. apostasy.