

What We Believe about Christ's Return

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

June 4, 2017

Article 9 of the Evangelical Free Church Statement of Faith says, "We believe in the personal, bodily and premillennial return of our Lord Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ, at a time known only to God, demands constant expectancy and, as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission." The God we know and serve is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. In Article 1 we learned that He is eternally existing. He is not bound by time in the ways that we are. It's fairly futile for our human minds to try to even grasp the concept of time. It seems to only get us more confused. For example, in the movie, "Back to the Future" Michael J. Fox, aka McFly, and the Doc taught us a lot about time. They made us ask questions about the past and the future and how they impact our present-day lives. We learned a lot about time from these movies, or at least we tried to. And, we learned that if you're going to travel through time you might as well do it in style... in a DeLorean! This morning we are going to do some theological time traveling. We are going to think about a very important and very serious event in the future of human history: The return of Jesus Christ; His 2nd coming. We can summarize the Christian Faith in this temporal context:¹ **In our past:** God's justifying grace saved us from the penalty of sin. **In our present:** God's sanctifying purpose is saving us from the power of sin. **In our future:** God's heavenly inheritance will save us from the presence of sin. God will be glorified in the gospel's final crescendo; the complete and total eradication of sin! Can we even imagine such a wonderful thing?

1. We believe that Christ WILL return. It WILL be. There is certainty that this will happen. To deny this reality, is to declare Jesus a liar. It would mean that we are denying the gospel's ultimate power to bring us to our final destination of heaven. When Jesus ascended into heaven, Acts 1:11 tells us that 2 angels appear, "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."² Christ's return will be personal and bodily.³ We are not talking about something only in a "spiritual" or mystical sense. We're being literal here. Christ's Return will be visible to everyone. Matthew 24:27 explains, "For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." Therefore, no one has missed it and no one will be able to miss it; it will be obvious to everyone.⁴

We believe that Christ's return will be premillennial. Revelation 20:1-4 talks about this, "And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time. I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years."

The word "Millennium" simply means "1,000." The term "premillennial" is basically referring to the order of End Times' events. Premillennial means that we believe, that Christ will return PRE or before, the 1,000-year millennium. Jesus will set up an "intermediate kingdom" here on earth and establish His identity as Lord and King. After ruling on planet earth for 1,000 years,⁵ He will then overthrow Satan once and for all. Then, there will be a final judgment and then... then we'll enjoy the new heaven and new earth

¹ See footnote #10 on p. 189 of *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011.

² Earlier we read in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven..."

³ Philippians 3:20-21 teaches us, "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." Jesus will return in his glorified body and will transform our bodies to be like His, ready for an eternal existence. (See *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, p. 215.)

⁴ Unfortunately, some groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses have the misunderstanding that Christ returned spiritually on October 1, 1914. *Evangelical Convictions*, p. 215.

⁵ Some see this 1,000 years as symbolic of a long period of time, not necessarily an exact 1,000 years.

for eternity. Some people may be surprised to find Premillennialism in our Statement of Faith. Everything else in the Statement of Faith is considered “essential” to an orthodox understanding of the gospel. And yet, Premillennialism has been a distinctive teaching within the EFCA. Throughout this sermon series, I have been recommending the book, *Evangelical Convictions*. This would be an especially helpful tool if you are interested in more detail regarding our Premillennial stance. This book clarifies that the EFCA does not hold premillennialism as “an essential doctrine of Evangelical faith, but it remains a distinctive theological position of the EFCA.”⁶ This has been our position regarding the end times for a while now and there are good explanations as for why. If you’d like to know more, I urge you to read the book.

In the broader Christian community, there are 3 primary millennial views:⁷

1. **Premillennial:** Jesus will return before leading a 1,000-year millennial reign on earth. (Pre = Before) 2. **Postmillennial:** Jesus will return after the Church has proclaimed the gospel to all nations and has brought in a Golden Millennial Age. (Post = After) 3. **Amillennial:** Right now the Church is enjoying a millennial reign with Jesus until He returns for us. (A = now) This prefix “A” can be a little confusing because “A” negates the word it precedes. Amillennialists believe there is NOT a future, earthly reign of Christ because the Millennium is happening right now through our present-day victorious Christian living. For our purposes, I have explained “A” to mean “now.” I must admit that there are distinctives to the post-mil and a-mil positions that are very attractive to me. The hopefulness of the world becoming a much improved, more moral place sounds good. The power of the gospel, not only to change individual lives, but also to change our entire planet to a mostly Christian population is energizing to think about.⁸ One of the greatest concerns about those who aren’t premillennialists is whether they believe that the Bible is without error. It is interesting to note though, that some of the strongest defenders of biblical inerrancy throughout history were not premillennial; including Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin, who were all amillennialists.⁹ It is also interesting to note that we have an upcoming vote within the EFCA. There is a motion being proposed in Austin, TX this month to replace the word “premillennial” with the word “glorious.” You can see a copy of the email on the table in the Fellowship Hall if you are interested. More and more pastors and global partners within the EFCA are considering that we may need to broaden our end times theology beyond the limits of “premillennialism.” There is a gathering consensus that the Bible allows for this broader understanding of End Times theology. We can be greatly encouraged by the statements of men like Justin Martyr, who said this regarding his own end times opinion: “many who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise.”¹⁰ I so much appreciate this humble and unifying statement.¹¹

2. Christ’s return calls for humility and readiness. This is probably the most important thing you could get out of this sermon: humility and readiness. Article 9 highlights that Christ’s Return is “at a time known only to God.” This calls us to HUMILITY. We don’t know when Christ will return and we can’t know when. We are not supposed to know when! Matthew 24:36 teaches us, ““But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father...” In Acts 1:6-7 we find the disciples eager to find out, “Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.” Sounds clear enough, right? “At a time known only to God.” And yet, we humans still can’t seem to leave this one alone. Dec. 21, 2012, does that date ring a bell? The stars aligned and the Maya calendar was used to predict the end of the world. We’re still here, of course, but I’m sure we’ll keep hearing predictions like these in the years to come. We can only hope that more and more of us will learn not to get pulled in to these end-of-the-world predictions. Any attempt to predict the date of Christ’s return is at best foolish or arrogant. At worst, it is harmful and sinful. Unfortunately, many

⁶ P. 226.

⁷ See further details on pp. 2584-2585 of *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, (Brian J. Tabb) edited by D.A. Carson, MI, 2015.

⁸ However, personally, I still don’t find either of these two millennial positions Scripturally convincing. That said, there does seem to be evidence throughout the NT that teaches a certain “now and not yet” to the Kingdom of God. In other words, while we are awaiting the future millennial reign of Christ on earth, Christ is also reigning right now in the hearts and lives of believers. Ephesians 1:19 taught us about “his incomparably great power for us who believe.” And in Ephesians 2:6 we learned that, through our union with Christ, we have already been seated “in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.” So, the complete reign of the Kingdom of God is not here yet, but there are current realities to how Jesus is reigning in and through us right now. On that much, at least, I hope we can agree.

⁹ See Greg Strand’s paper on the Statement of Faith, Article 9, p. 12.

¹⁰ As quoted in *Evangelical Convictions*, p. 225, footnote #22.

¹¹ It is worth noting that Revelation 20 is the only place in Scripture that mentions a 1,000-year reign. (However, some might argue for verses like Isaiah 24:22, 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, and 2 Peter 2:4.) Therefore, we should all be careful just how much emphasis we give to our particular millennial position. This fact alone should cause all of us to promote our specific understandings of eschatology with great humility.

have tried and failed to predict the exact date of Christ's return, thereby embarrassing themselves and discouraging the faith of others. We do well to avoid any such speculation in the future and, in HUMILITY, to hold loosely to our own ability to read and predict the signs of Christ's return.¹² Our church has a helpful little booklet on this called, "Has the "Prophecy Bug" Bitten You? It was written by our Pastor Emeritus, Fred Martin. We have free copies available by contacting the church.

The uncertainty of when Christ will return calls for an attitude of constant expectancy. The phrase "constant expectancy" in Article 9 is a call to READINESS. Mark 13:33 warns us, "Be on your guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come." Matthew 24:42-44 agrees, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." Rather than the phrase "constant expectancy," some of you may have been watching for the word "imminent." That one little word "imminent" opens up a very long conversation about the rapture and the Great Tribulation. Last Sunday, I had someone ask me, is the Free Church pre-trib, mid-trib, or post-trib? Well, here's my question: How long do you want this sermon to be!?! ;) The Great Tribulation is described in the book of Revelation as a terrible time of final judgment on sin. God's wrath is poured out in graphic ways that only apocalyptic literature can truly illustrate. These will be terrible times for planet earth. The ongoing question regarding the Great Tribulation though is whether or not Christ-followers will still be here.

Pre-tribulation = Christians leave earth "pre" or before the Great Tribulation. This is called the rapture. **Mid-tribulation** = Christians leave earth midway into the Great Tribulation. **Post-tribulation** = Christians are here "post," all the way through and after the Great Tribulation. That little word "imminent" commonly suggests a pretribulation rapture, i.e. an "at-any-moment rapture of the church" before the Great Tribulation begins.¹³ There are some within the EFCA who believe in a pretribulation rapture, but others who hold a mid or posttribulation view. All are welcomed, and considered within the fold of evangelical orthodoxy. We have avoided using the word "imminent" in our Statement of Faith, so as not to favor one particular view of the tribulation.¹⁴ This is in keeping with our commitment to the saying, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity."¹⁵ We agree to get along even if we disagree on some points of end times beliefs. Our unity comes in our commitment to the inerrancy of the Bible. The goal of the EFCA is not just to be as broad as possible in every area to maximize participation or to be "more inclusive." The goal is to be narrowly centered around the essentials of the gospel and then to be more broadly open where Scripture allows room in secondary, debatable areas.¹⁶ We need to guard against getting overly consumed with the details of End Times speculation or with theological debates that hinder us from having a healthy, productive witness.¹⁷ Here's some good news: When we get to heaven, there will not be an entrance exam about where you and I stand on end times issues! 😊

3. Christ's return motivates Christ-followers. Article 9 says that Christ's return motivates us to godly living, sacrificial service, and energetic mission. This is the Christian Living we talked about last week. Titus 2:11-13 teaches us, "For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God

¹² Consider Matthew 24:15.

¹³ This also ties in with implications for how some interpret the Old Testament, "particularly in the way that passages referring to Israel were to be understood." (See notes from Greg Strand on EFCA Statement of Faith, Article 9, p. 6)

¹⁴ One ramification of this stance is that we are open to Dispensationalism, Progressive Dispensationalism, and Historic Premillennialism. If you don't know what those terms means exactly, don't sweat it. But check out Greg Strand's notes on the Statement of Faith, Article 9, pp. 11-12 to learn more.

¹⁵ The EFCA and membership in our own local church do not require nor recommend any particular view on the Great Tribulation. That's why it's not even mentioned in our Statement of Faith. Nor do we require a particular view on exactly how Old Testament promises for Israel are fulfilled in the New Testament. Certainly these kinds of topics can involve much, spirited debate. We welcome good debate and biblical sparring. We do not however, welcome unnecessary divisiveness nor the distraction it can create, causing us to lose sight of our gospel mandate.

¹⁶ So, in summary of the tribulation, some of us believe that Jesus is going to pull the church out in the rapture, then the Great Tribulation will come on earth, and then Jesus will come back to set up his Millennial reign and judgment. Others, believe the church will be raptured mid-way through the Great Tribulation. Still others, would say that Christians will be here through the entire Great Tribulation and then Christ will come. All of these theological positions are respected as orthodox and accepted in the fellowship of the EFCA.

¹⁷ Eschatology has much Scripture assigned to it, including many New Testament and Old Testament passages. (See Matthew 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21; 1 Corinthians 15; 1-2 Thessalonians and Revelation for example.) Much of this text is symbolic and framed within an apocalyptic genre. The sheer volume and complexity of these verses help explain why it is difficult to fit it all together and why there are varying points of view among orthodox scholars. Rather than necessarily articulating a detailed timeline for every end time event, these eschatological passages consistently weave in very practical messages for believers to remain encouraged and to endure. Wait eagerly. Keep careful watch.

and Savior, Jesus Christ.” There are many different approaches to how we should spend our time while we are waiting for the end of the world. There’s an interesting Reality TV show called, “Doomsday Preppers.” Anyone seen it? It focuses on the efforts that some people are making to get ready for the end of the world. They show different means of emergency preparedness with supplies of food, water, weapons, and various underground survival bunkers. Now, being prepared for potential hard times is a good idea. But, is this the kind of focus that Christians should have as we prepare for the end of the world? Well, that’s not the kind of preparation that Scripture focuses on.

1 John 2:28 teaches us, “And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.” Scripture teaches us to press on, in our daily faith! James 5:7-8 agrees, “Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.” Article 9 has this wonderfully encouraging phrase: “our blessed hope.” We long for the coming of Christ! This blessed hope informs our worldview, it helps us to set the right priorities, and it encourages us in the midst of struggle and persecution. As time marches on, we need to guard against growing complacent. We are stewards responsible for our Master’s estate. We’ve been entrusted with the Lord’s resources. Matthew 24:45-46, ““Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.”

If we’re honest, we’ve probably all had moments when we’ve asked God, Lord, what’s taking so long? Or, perhaps we’ve had people say to us, “the Bible was written almost 2,000 years ago, do you really think those promises are going to come true? 2 Peter 3:3-6 brings us this encouragement, “Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed.” Good old Noah. Noah labored patiently for a long time building the ark. I’m sure there must have been days of public ridicule or personal doubt. But, can you imagine when the first drops of rain started falling and the water started rising? I’m guessing that a huge smile of relief came to Noah’s face! And, I wonder if his wife and kids felt relieved, “Hey, this guy isn’t nuts after all!” 2 Peter 3:8 says, “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.” I can still remember, when our kids were younger, they were always so excited for the long journey through the woods and down the trail to the beaver pond. But, on the way home, their little legs would really start to tire out. “How much longer dad? How much farther dad?” I’d always reply, “not far now, just a little farther girls.” I would encourage them and sometimes carry them on my shoulders. But I was never worried that we wouldn’t make it. I knew the end would come. I was confident that our home was waiting for us just down the trail a little farther.

In Revelation 22:20 Jesus gives us this blessed hope: “...**Yes, I am coming soon....**” Like the last lap of a race, we find ourselves cheered on by Jesus’ own promise: He is coming soon!

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