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THE LAST DAYS

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by

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OUTLINE

	Page
Introduction	1
I. THE MEANING OF 'LAST DAYS'	3
A. The Beginning of 'the Last Days'	3
B. The Consummation of 'the Last Days'	5
II. THE IMMINENCE OF 'THE LAST DAYS'	7
A. The Closeness of the End	7
B. The Problem of the Delay	9
C. Living in the Last Hour	11
III. THE SIGNS OF 'THE LAST DAYS'	12
A. Mistaken Interpretations of Signs	12
B. The Signs of the Last Days	14
C. Discerning the Times	19
Conclusion	21

D. Ewert: THE LAST DAYS

THE LAST DAYS

The shape of things to come is of deep concern to many people in our day--both believers and unbelievers. One sign of the deep insecurity and the pessimism of the unbelieving world is the current interest in astrology. "But the danger is that Christians, experiencing this same sense of helplessness in face of world events, can replace astrology with biblical prophecy" (W. Dyrness, "The Age of Aquarius," in Dreams, Visions and Oracles, by Armerding and Gasque, p.23).

There appears to be an apocalyptic mood in the Western world. The church scene also reflects an almost feverish concern about the End. Bookstores are doing brisk business as hundreds of thousands of readers snap up the latest paperbacks on prophecy. Many of the titles of these colorful publications have a sensational ring to them, and elicit enthusiastic reader response.

Many of these writings might command more confidence if the writers all came to the same conclusions. While all of them (at least those in the evangelical stream) claim to base their studies on Holy Writ, they disagree widely in their findings--to the consternation of many devout Christian folk. One reason for this disagreement--one which many find hard to admit--is that the Bible does not provide us with sufficient information to make it possible for its readers to plot the course of future events in detail. Perhaps even harder to admit is the fact that our understanding of what seems to be clearly stated in the Scriptures is limited and fallible.

This should, however, not lead us to an avoidance of the subject of eschatology. The Bible from beginning to end is eschatological; both Old and New Testament look forward to the day when God will intervene in this world's

history in a decisive way. Moreover, most evangelicals are agreed on those truths which belong to the essence of our hope: The return of Christ in glory, the resurrection of the dead, the judgment of all mankind, and the eternal bliss of the redeemed--quite enough to give our life seriousness, purpose and joy.

Throughout history, however, there have been those whose curiosity led them to develop rather detailed structures of the last days. Such time-schemes are intriguing to some believers; others find them confusing. Much more serious, however, is the fact that disagreements over side-issues in eschatology often lead to deep divisions among Bible readers. What is more, those areas which are not so clearly taught in the Scriptures are often pushed into the center and thereby the deep unity of faith which all those who confess the Bible to be their ultimate authority in matters of doctrine should enjoy, is endangered. Or, when certain methods of interpretation are equated with the Bible itself, then anyone who interprets the Bible differently is obviously not Biblical. One area of considerable misunderstanding is that of 'the last days'.

Everywhere today one hears believers say, "We are in the last days". When one probes a little deeper one soon discovers that the term 'last days' is not understood in the same way by everyone. There are those who confidently proclaim that the last days began with 1948, with the establishment of the modern state of Israel, and that God will wrap up this present age no later than 1980. It may well be that the last trumpet will sound by 1980 (or earlier), but what about all those faithful followers of Jesus through the long centuries of the Christian era who also believed that they were living in the last days? Were they wrong? Our answer would depend on how we understand the

term 'last days'. It is the purpose of this paper to examine what the New Testament means by 'the last days', and to raise the question of the imminence of the end. We will also inquire briefly into the signs of the 'last days', and conclude with a few comments on the challenge of living in the last days.

I. THE MEANING OF 'LAST DAYS'

A. The Beginning of 'the Last Days'. According to the prophets of old, the new age would be inaugurated by the outpouring of God's Spirit upon man (Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 36:25-27; Joel 2:28). Peter saw the fulfilment of these prophecies (specifically that of Joel) in the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:17). With the coming of the Spirit the last days had begun. F. F. Bruce, in commenting on Acts 2:17, puts it this way: "The 'last days' began with Christ's first advent and will end with his second advent; they are the days during which the age to come overlaps with the present age" (Commentary on Acts, NICNT, p.68).

The coming of the Spirit was only the capstone of the Christ-event, and so it is equally correct to say that Christ inaugurated the last days. The prophets wondered about the time of Christ's coming, says Peter (I Peter 1:10f.) but now that Christ has been "manifested at the end of the times" (I Pet. 1:20), the matter is clear.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, states that "the ends of the ages" have met in the believers of the apostolic age (I Cor. 10:11). While God spoke in many and various ways in the past, says the writer to the Hebrews, "in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son" (Heb. 1:2). The same writer speaks of "the powers of the age to come" (Heb. 6:5) which are experienced by the believers today. Also, speaking of Christ's first Advent, he affirms that Christ "has appeared once for all at the end of the ages" (9:26).

John in his first Epistle tells his "little children" twice that it is the last time or hour (I John 2:18). Since the new age had dawned with the coming of Christ, Christians knew that they were living in the last days. Of course, the present evil age was still very much in existence, but as Paul puts it, Christ "delivered us from this present evil age" (Gal. 1:4). And while the church knows that the powers of darkness are still at work, the darkness is already passing away and true light is shining (I John 2:8).

John R. Stott writes, "All Jews were familiar with the division of history into 'the present age' and 'the age to come' (cf. e.g. Mt. 12:32), and the New Testament teaches that 'the age to come' came with Jesus. He inaugurated it, so that the two ages overlap one another" (Commentary on Epistles of John, Tyndale, p.93).

This period in which the two ages overlap was, however, viewed as transitional. The 'last days', which began with Jesus and the outpouring of His Spirit (Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:1,2; Jam. 5:3) or the 'last times' (I Pet. 1:20; I Cor. 10:11) were viewed as lasting only for a period of time. The age to come had broken into history, and therefore this present age was drawing to a close (I Cor. 7:31). This interim between Christ's first and second coming would not last forever. The 'last days' were to end when the 'last day' arrived (John 6:39,40,44,54; 11:24; 12:48); the 'last times' would conclude a 'last time' (I Pet. 1:5).

That this interim would last as long as it has (or may yet last) was not known to the New Testament writers, for the day and the hour of the consummation of this age is hidden in God. God is not bound by our clocks and calendars. But we know, on the authority of His Word, that these last days in which the Church has lived so long will come to an end.

B. The Consummation of the 'Last Days'. While the New Testament Church had the deep conviction that the 'last days' had begun with the coming of Christ and the outpouring of His Spirit, the Spirit was also the guarantee that these last days would not last forever. For this reason the Spirit is called the 'first fruits' of the harvest that is yet to come (Rom. 8:23), and the 'downpayment' on the inheritance into which we are yet to enter (Eph. 1:14). "Through the Spirit we wait for the hope of righteousness" (Gal. 5:5).

We must then distinguish clearly between the 'last days' and the 'last day'. Our Lord spoke repeatedly of the 'last day'. "And I will raise him up in the last day" (John 6:39, 44, 54), is our Lord's promise to those who believe in Him. Martha, in the midst of her grief at the death of Lazarus, still clung firmly to the hope that "he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day," (John 11:24) and Jesus did not question that hope. Jesus warns that His word will judge those who reject Him "in the last day" (John 12:48).

Another way of speaking of the 'last day' is to call it the consummation, the wrap-up (synteleia). Jesus' disciples on one occasion asked the Master: "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and the close of the age" (Mt. 24:3). Notice here the connection between the coming of Christ and the consummation of this age! Jesus Himself had spoken several parables that focused on the 'close' of the age (Mt. 13:39, 30, 49). The last words of Jesus before he ascended to heaven were: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt. 28:20).

Sometimes the last day, the consummation, is called simply "the day" (I Thess. 5:5; I Cor. 3:13; Heb. 10:25)--the background for this term is the Old Testament shorthand 'the Day', for the 'the Day of the Lord' (cf. Mal. 3:19).

At other times the demonstrative is added and we get it in the form of 'day' (Mt. 7:22; Lk. 10:12; 2 Tim. 1:12,18). It is also called "the great day" (Jude 6; Rev. 6:17; 16:14). More commonly, however, (especially in Paul), the last day is called "the day of the Lord" (I Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:2) or "the day of God" (2 Pet. 3:10,12; Rev. 16:14). And since Jesus was called "Lord" by early Christians, the Old Testament term "day of the Lord" was easily recast and becomes the "day of Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 1:8; 2Cor. 1:14; Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16).

Occasionally the character of the day is denoted by such phrases as "the day of judgment" (Mt. 11:22,24; 12:36; I John 4:17; 2 Peter 2:9) or "the day of wrath" (Rom. 2:5). But it is also a "day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30). It is the day when the 'last' trumpet will sound (I Cor. 15:52) and the 'last' enemy (death) will ultimately be overcome (I Cor. 15:26).

This last day is also called simply "the end" (telos). Jesus in His apocalyptic discourse warned, "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the 'end' is not yet" (Mk. 13:7). Prior to the 'end', the gospel is to be preached in all the world (Mt. 24:14). According to I Corinthians 15:24, the end will come when Christ delivers the kingdom over to the Father after vanquishing all evil powers.

We see then, that the 'last days' began with Christ, but the 'last day' is yet to come. The 'end times' were inaugurated with Christ's coming, but the 'end' has not yet come. When the consummation of this present age will occur we do not know, and Jesus forbade us to speculate (Acts 1:7). What then do we do with the many passages in the New Testament which state that the end, the consummation, the last day, the coming of Christ, is near? Let us see what the New Testament has to say on that!

II. THE IMMINENCE OF THE 'LAST DAY'

A. The Closeness of the End. Quite obviously the New Testament writers held that the coming of the Lord was near. Paul lived and served with the consciousness that "the appointed time has grown very short" (I Cor. 7:29). Writing to the Romans he reminds them that "salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far spent, the day is at hand" (Rom. 13:11,12). (Whether Philippians 4:5, "The Lord is near" is strictly eschatological is not quite certain.)

Other apostolic writers share Paul's view that time is hastening to the end. "The end of all things is near," says Peter (I Pet. 4:7). James writes, "Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near" (Jas. 5:8). The writer to the Hebrews exhorts his readers to encourage one another and this "all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Heb. 10:25).

John, too, stresses the imminence of the end. "Little children it is the last hour", he writes (I John 2:18). The Book of Revelation begins and ends with the reminder that "the time is near" (Rev. 1:3; 22:10). Lilje comments on this expression:

"The short sentence 'the time is near' is like a wave of the hand, by which the seer summons the readers and hearers of this book to come with him to the outermost ramparts of time, to the point where time will be fulfilled, where at last all the confusion of the course of history will fade away into the evening of world history, and already the light of the new morning begins to shine, which is no longer that of this world at all" (The Last Book of the Bible, p. 43).

Another way in which John stresses the imminence of the end is to say that the things which God had revealed to him about the future will take place "quickly" (Rev. 1:1; 22:6--en tachei; 2:16; 3:11; 22:7,20--tachu; the root of our word tachometer, i.e. speedometer). "I come quickly," is our Lord's word of assurance to the suffering saints of Asia Minor.

Since John wrote, 1900 years have passed, and that makes such expressions problematic for some Bible readers. One way of reading such statements is to say that when God's hour strikes then things will happen quickly. Another way is to view the concept of 'quickly' in the sense of 'certainly'. Caird thinks that it is the persecution of the church John meant and not the consummation of history (The Revelation of St. John the Divine, p.12). But a much sounder approach is to understand John as expressing "urchristliches Zeitgefuehl." In the presence of eternity time shrinks together; the perspective is abbreviated. The church lives always in the twilight just before the dawn of the eternal kingdom.

There is, however, an added nuance in the concept of 'quickly'. It underscores God's control of history. The suddenness with which God acts is a sign of his power. "And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Mal. 3:1). "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God" (Lk. 2:13); "And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind" (Acts 2:2). Nothing stops God from acting when the time has come and the final hour of this world's clock has struck.

A saying of Jesus which has puzzled Bible readers through the centuries seems to suggest (at least on the surface) that Jesus Himself expected the end to come very shortly. In his apocalyptic discourse he says, "Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, until all these things be accomplished" (Mk. 13:30). The question is, however, whether we know for certain what Jesus meant by generation (genea--used either in the sense of people or of time). Does he mean the human race? The Jewish people? The Christians? This 'sort of people'? Jesus' contemporaries? The latter is the view of Lagrange, Bruce, Lane, Cullmann and others, except that some

limit "all these things" (tauta panta) to the destruction of Jerusalem, while others take it to refer to Christ's passion, resurrection and ascension. Certainly we do violence to the text when we insist that a generation is 30 to 40 years, and peg the beginning of "this generation" at 1948, and on the basis of that kind of calculation predict the date of Christ's coming. All one needs to do is to read two more verses in Mark 13 to know that this is wrong, for in verses 32,33 Jesus says, "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come." (That the early church preserved this somewhat embarrassing saying makes it all the more trustworthy. While Luke omits "not the Son," and many MSS omit it in Matthew 24:36, it is very secure in Mark.)

B. The Problem of the Delay. The apostles have been charged with error for teaching that they were living in the last days and that they expected the Lord to return in their life-time. Indeed, some New Testament scholars argue that some of the teachings of Jesus were deliberately recast as the awareness of the fact that the church might continue on earth for some time grew upon them. Others have tried to show that there is a gradual decline of the hope in the imminent return of the Lord in the letters of Paul. That, however, is somewhat hard to prove, for even in the Pastorals hope still burns brightly (e.g. Tit. 2:11ff.). On the other hand, in I Thessalonians (which may be the earliest letter of Paul extant), he takes into account the possibility of dying before the rapture takes place: "Whether we wake [live] or sleep [die], we might live with him" (I Thess.5:10).

Hand in hand with the hope of the imminent return of Christ in the first century church, there are also clear indications that there would be an interim between the two comings. And this expectation of an interim was

not simply born out of a delay of Christ's return, but was anticipated by Jesus. It is, for example, inherent in the commission to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. One can see it also in the comments Jesus made about the loving act of the woman who poured the costly ointment on him: "Truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (Mark 14:9). That would take time!

This twofold attitude of the believers regarding the return of Christ--that it is near, and that it may yet be far away--has characterized the church's time of waiting from the first century up to the present (and it must continue to do so). It is for this reason that we have repeated admonitions in the writings of the New Testament to remain calm and to wait patiently for Christ's coming. "We wait for it with patience," says Paul (Rom. 8:24). The farmer, as James has it, "waits patiently for the precious fruits of the earth....You also be patient....for the coming of the Lord is near" (Jam. 5:7). Indeed, Christ will return a second time "to save those who eagerly wait for him" (Heb. 9:28).

Already in the first century there were those who made mockery of the Christian hope of our Lord's return (and they are still with us). As the time of waiting was extended they asked, "Where is the promise of his coming?" (2 Pet. 3:4). And Peter gives a three-fold answer to these scoffers: (a) God's word was fulfilled in the past, and so it is reasonable to expect his promise about his coming to be fulfilled in this instance as well (vv. 5-7); (b) God does not measure time the way we do. "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (V. 8); (c) The reason this time of waiting is extended is that God is forbearing and does not wish that any should perish but that all should reach repentance (v. 9). God's grace is extending

the day of salvation. Therefore, while the church prays, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (maranatha), it thanks God for every day of grace that He gives to mankind.

C. Living in the Last Hour. Rather than accusing the apostles of error in their hope of the imminent return of Christ, we should learn from them how to live in the last hour. It is quite appropriate for us (as it was for Paul) to say, "We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord" (I Thess. 4:15). We too can confidently affirm, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed" (I Cor. 15:51). (The fact that some MSS read, "We shall all sleep but we shall not all be changed" is probably an attempt by a scribe to save Paul from embarrassment when in fact he did fall asleep before the return of Christ.)

There is throughout the New Testament a dual emphasis of the 'already' and the 'not yet'. There is an awareness of a time of waiting in which the church is to carry out its commission (the words of assurance, "Lo I am with you to the end of the age" are given precisely to those who carry out this commission), but there is also a lively expectation of the coming of the Lord. However, no author ever attempts to predict the precise time of Christ's coming. When believers got caught up in the excitement of an imminent return of the Lord (as the Thessalonians) they had to be reprovved and told to go back to their daily work (I Thess. 4:11f.). They are warned not "to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come" (2 Thess. 2:2).

To live in the last hour does not mean that we constantly talk about the end of the world. It means rather that we "redeem the time for the days are evil" (Eph. 5:16). To live in the last hour means to labor faithfully in the calling which God has given to us, "knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (I Cor. 15:58). It means to live loosely to the things of this

world--"those using the world as not using it to the full, for the form of this world passes away" (I Cor. 7:31).

If, as we confess, our commonwealth is in heaven (Phil. 3:20), then we must live as "aliens and exiles" in this world (I Pet. 2:11). Paul Minear (in a class lecture) suggested that the closest modern equivalent to the New Testament concept of the 'pilgrim' is the word 'refugee'. Pilgrimages to the Holy Land in our day are often a sign of our material affluence, for we can always return to our comfortable homes. The refugee has no homeland. Where believers are conscious of living in the last hour they confess with the writer of the Epistle to Diognetus, of the early second century, that "every foreign land is our homeland and every homeland is our foreign land" (5:5).

To live in the last hour means to have our loins girt and our lamps burning through prayer and repentance, waiting for the coming of the Bridegroom.

Having tried, then, to define what the New Testament means by the last days, and to identify the dialectic of imminence and waiting, we now turn to the question of the signs of the times.

III. THE SIGNS OF 'THE LAST DAYS'

A. Mistaken Interpretations of Signs. If we take seriously what the New Testament says about the last days, or last times, namely that these refer to the entire interim between the two comings of Christ, then the signs of the last days must also be the kind that are in evidence throughout this period. If the Bible is to be relevant to the life of the church throughout the ages, then what it has to say about the signs of the times must have some meaning also for Christians in all generations.

Because this was not understood influential speakers or writers have again and again identified current events as clear indicators on God's time-clock.

And no sooner had one prognostication of the date of our Lord's return failed, then the next one was made. As early as the second century we have the attempts by the Montanists to predict the end of the world before the end of the century. Many Christians were certain that the year AD 1000 would mark the end of the Church age, and certainly as we approach the year 2000 we can expect a repetition of this phenomenon. Martin Luther was at times quite certain that the world would end in his life-time. Was not Antichrist (the Pope) already reigning? Even Gog and Magog were upon the scene (i.e. the Turks).

John Wesley followed the Pietist theologian, Johann Bengel, in expecting the final overthrow of the Beast in 1836. C. I. Scofield, with many others, was deeply convinced that World War I marked the beginning of the final conflict, which would bring this age of grace to an end. Leonard Sale-Harrison felt that the end would come in 1940 or 41, because of what he thought was the revival of the Roman Empire under Benito Mussolini. More recently, Dr. Charles R. Taylor (Jesus Is Coming Soon) proposed September 6, 1976, as the date of Christ's coming. Taking 1948 as his starting point, and allowing 35 years for a generation, and then applying Jesus' promise, "This generation shall not pass away till all these things take place," to our day, he arrives at the date 1983. Subtract seven years of tribulation (which in his understanding follow the Rapture) and we get 1976. It is exactly this kind of thing that discredits prophecy to such a degree that many sincere Christians turn away in disgust and leave the subject to cranks.

If we are to believe that Christ's coming is very near because of the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, then what did the imminence of the parousia, which Christians have adhered to throughout the centuries, mean when there was no such state?

All such attempts arise out of the conviction (misguided, we think) that current events can be made to match biblical prophecies. On what grounds, for example, can it be said that modern Russia is the Gog and Magog of Ezekiel 38 and 39, and therefore the end must be near? (Interestingly, in Revelation 20:8 Gog and Magog represent the evil forces that attack the city of God after the millennium, not before.)

But are there then no signs that might alert us to the imminence of the parousia? Indeed there are, but they are the kind of signs that make sense in any generation, in the first century as well as the last. Let us give some examples!

B. Signs of the Last Days. It would take us too far afield if we were to survey the entire New Testament. Moreover, there is considerable disagreement by Bible students on the number of signs mentioned by our Lord and the apostles. In a recent booklet by A. Skevington Woods, Signs of the Times (Baker, 1970), eighteen such signs are listed. We want to restrict ourselves to a few, which may serve as examples.

In answer to the question of the disciples about the sign of the end, our Lord, in his apocalyptic discourse recorded in Mark 13 (parallels in Matthew 24 and Luke 21), mentions a number of signs. Some of the signs which our Lord mentioned point clearly to the developments that would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem, others again are alluded to by New Testament writers in contexts other than the destruction of the Jewish State in AD 70, and must therefore be understood as characterising the end-times generally.

1. Deception. Jesus warned that the end-times would be characterized by deception. False Christs would rise and lead many astray (Mk. 13:5,6). The warning is repeated in Mark 13:22, "False Christs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect."

Paul wrote to Timothy: "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, through the pretensions of liars whose consciences are seared" (I Tim. 4:1,2). Peter is equally emphatic: "There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies ... And many will follow their licentiousness . . ." (2 Peter 2:1,2). Similarly John in the Revelation says of the beast from the land that "by the signs which it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast [from the sea], it deceives those who dwell on earth . . ." (13:14). This was happening in the Asiatic churches while John wrote and this has happened throughout the Christian era, and will continue to happen right up to the end.

The deception of the saints that we are witnessing in our day is frightening. We are surrounded by a chaos of cults. And it has been asked, seriously, whether much of what is published today in the name of prophecy does not fall into the category of what Paul condemns as the desire for "teachings which tickle the ears". That, too, as he suggests, is a sign of the last days (2 Tim. 4:3). Of course there were deceivers already in the first century and it would be hard to say how close we are to the end by pointing to the profusion of cults (not to mention the occult). The need for watchfulness is as great today as it was in the days of Christ and the apostles.

2. War. A second sign of the end-times mentioned in Mark 13 is war. "When you shall hear of wars and rumors of wars, be not troubled: These things must needs come to pass; but the end is not yet" (v.7). The disciples were not to think that when war broke out (as it did in AD 66) that the end was imminent. The entire interim preceding the return of Christ was to be marked by war. The first apocalyptic rider which John saw riding across the pages of human history had a bow and "he went out conquering and to conquer"

(Rev. 6:2) And the one that followed him, on a bright-red horse, was to take away peace from the earth, "so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword" (6:4).

While there have been long periods of peace in some parts of the world, war has been the tragic lot of mankind throughout history. The year 1914 marked the beginning of the first universal war, and another followed shortly thereafter (1939-1945). With the dropping of the first atomic bomb the threat of total annihilation has hung over our planet like a sword of Damocles. And whereas Christ's followers seek to preserve, not to destroy life, and whereas they do what they can to establish peace, the church must be prepared to live and to work in the midst of a war-torn world until the day comes when nations will learn war no more (Isa. 2:4).

There are those who are convinced that a third world war would mark the end of this age. That may well be, but it would be rash to proclaim this as a biblical truth. While there is no doubt that history is moving to a final showdown between God and the forces of evil, it would be presumptuous to predict that the next war will be Armageddon (Rev. 16:16). War is a sign of the times until our Lord himself appears with the armies of heaven to make an end of all rebellion against God (Rev. 19).

3. Earthquakes. Jesus mentions earthquakes in answer to the disciples' question about the signs of the end (Mk. 13:8A). Earthquakes occurred throughout the Christian era, swallowing up entire cities with their inhabitants. The seismologists have their scientific explanation for them. Of late earthquakes seem to have increased in frequency (or is it that the seismograph and the television screen have made us more conscious of their frequency and their terror?) The book of Revelation, which portrays the end-times with apocalyptic

imagery, mentions earthquakes no fewer than five times (6:12; 8:5; 11:13,19; 16:18).

We do not know how many earthquakes we will yet witness before the end comes, but every tremor is God's reminder that the existence of all earth-dwellers is insecure, and every quake is a call to mankind to turn to God in repentance before the day comes when he will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens (Heb. 12:26).

4. Famine. Jesus mentions famine together with earthquakes (Mk. 13:8b). Famine is a frequent aftermath of war, and the rider that follows the one who brings bloodshed (Rev. 6:4) rides on the black horse of famine (Rev. 6:5). Famine is often caused by natural catastrophes, such as drought. Much of the hunger in our world, however, is due to man's own mismanagement of nature's gifts. But whatever may be the causes, famine is a sign of the end-times. From the time of Agabus, who predicted a famine in the reign of Claudius (Acts 11:28), until the return of our Lord, when we will hunger and thirst no more, there will be famines. The forecasts of world-famine are so frightening that some scientists fear that should this earth escape a nuclear holocaust, it may end with an exhaustion of its food supplies. We do not know.

Meanwhile, Christians must be in the fore in bringing relief to the hungry. Those who ask in the judgment: "Lord when did we see you hungry . . .?" receive the answer: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:37,40).

War and famine and earthquakes, said Jesus, were the "beginning of travail" (Mk. 13:8). While Jesus may have had the destruction of the Jewish State in mind, these phenomena are also the birth-pangs of the present order which must give way to the eternal kingdom when Christ returns. Christ's followers, therefore must be prepared to face a turbulent world with faith and confidence.

5. Persecution. This is another sign mentioned by Jesus (Mk. 13:9,11-13). The Church will always be under fire. With varying degrees of intensity and extent, persecution has been the lot of the church in every century. Jewish tribunals, the persecutions of the Caesars, the tortures of the Inquisition, the blood of our Anabaptist forbears, the concentration camps of Siberia and the recent martyrs of Uganda tell the story of the way that leads from the cross to the crown.

There has never been an age when somewhere in the world Christians have not suffered for the faith. And while Christians thank God for every country that has freedom of religion, and while they do not deliberately make martyrs of themselves, they know "that all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (I Tim. 3:12)--if not by sword and thumbscrew, then by ridicule or job-discrimination.

6. Mission. Another sign which Jesus mentions is the preaching of the Gospel to all nations (Mk. 13:10). Mark 13:10 stands between two verses which speak of persecution (vv. 9, and 11f.), as if to suggest that the resistance which the church will experience from the world is often prompted by her evangelistic efforts. In any case, before the end comes, the Good News must be preached to all nations. The consummation will not take place until the mission of the church is complete. This does not mean, however, that we can tell by the size of the missionary force or other statistics, how close to the end of the age we are.

We have mentioned half a dozen signs of the times; others could be added. These signs were given to the disciples of Jesus to assure them that in spite of the darkness of the present age, God will fulfill his purposes; and in spite of suffering and tragedy the church must never lose sight of its mission.

The signs of the times are not like road signs which may read, "Fresno, 50 Miles." So much of today's prophetic preaching is of that nature, and often the Biblical message of the blessed hope is smothered by interpretations of current events. But the increase in false cults, the rumors of global warfare, the devastating earthquakes, the hungry masses, or, for that matter, the great progress in evangelism, cannot conclusively give us information on how close to the end we are. These signs of the times span the entire age of the Church; they are signs which we must always regard as God's call to lift up our heads for our redemption draws nigh.

C. Discerning the Times. Jesus on one occasion accused his adversaries of failing to interpret the signs of the times. "You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky," said Jesus, "but you cannot interpret the signs of the times" (Mt. 16:3). Surrounded by evidence that God's new age had dawned in the person and work of Jesus, they were still looking for signs. It is dangerously easy to get caught up in the attempt to interpret current events in the light of prophecy and not to discern the times at all. Could the rash of books on the end-times, with one author outdoing the other in sensational claims, also be a sign of the times? Can these not easily become a convenient instrument in the hand of Satan to side-track us from our true mission in the world?

Our Lord said that the last days would be like the days of Noah before the Flood. They ate and drank, married and gave in marriage (Mt. 24:37ff.). I have heard these verses expounded as referring to the gluttony, drunkenness and sexual permissiveness of the days of Noah. And since these evils plague our society as well, the end must be near. But eating, drinking and marrying are all legitimate and essential activities. The problem of Noah's contemporaries was that they did not discern the times in which they lived. They were

completely immersed in earthly pursuits, not their drunkenness, but their secularism, hedonism, materialism proved fatal. If that is so, we are well advised to apply this passage to ourselves, rather than to figure out by the number of divorces or by the amount of liquor consumed in the United States and Canada in 1977, how close we are to the end.

Moreover, preoccupation with the darkness of our times--war, famine, earthquakes, immorality, witchcraft, etc.--can plunge us into defeatism and a determinism which is pagan in character and far removed from what Jesus and the apostles mean when they call us to watchfulness. If war is a sign of the times, should we then stop working for peace? If "men's love will grow cold" in the last days (Mt. 24:12) shall we do nothing about renewal. I have heard it said on the basis of Revelation 3, that the lethargy of the church is a sign of the times--as if we had entered the Laodicean period and that there's little we can do about it, for it is all predicted. But that is fatalism, not faith. If famine is the fulfillment of prophecy, shall we then not give our bread to the hungry? Robert Clouse writes: "Perhaps nothing has discouraged evangelical Christians more from engaging in social action than the social ethic which encourages an excessive emphasis upon the date of Christ's return" ("The Danger of Mistaken Hopes" in Dreams, Visions and Oracles, by Armerding and Gasque, P.37).

C. S. Lewis warned that belief in the Second Coming of Christ must never preclude "sober work for the future within the limits of ordinary morality and prudence . . . happy are those whom it finds laboring in their vocations, whether they were merely going out to feed the pigs or laying good plans to deliver humanity a hundred years hence from some great evil . . . No matter; you were at your post when the inspection came" (Quoted by Clouse, Ibid, p.37).

CONCLUSION

Between the inauguration of the last days with the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit the church lives 'between the times'. This interim has been expanded into a period of nearly 2000 years, and while many are certain that we will not reach the year 2000 before our Lord returns, we have not authority to make such predictions. What then should be the believer's attitude during this interim, in these last days?

Our life of faith during this time of waiting is lived in a tension between 'already' and the 'not yet'. This explains many of our conflicts with the world in which we live. Whereas we have tasted of the powers of the age to come we are still beset with evil powers. We have the assurance that if we walk by the Spirit we will not fulfill the desires of the flesh, but we also know of the continuing conflict between the desires of the flesh and the Spirit (Gal. 5:16,17). Whereas on the one hand God has made his mysteries known to us (I Cor. 2:6ff.; Eph. 1:8; 3:4), and we are called upon to be stewards of these mysteries (I Cor. 4:1), our understanding of God's purposes is still rather restricted. Our prophesying is so limited because our knowledge is partial. "But when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away" (I Cor. 13:10).

Because of the tension of the already and the not yet, we must also remain modest in our claims about our spiritual experiences. We experience salvation here in this age only as a foretaste; we "are being saved" (I Cor. 1:18); we "are kept by the power of God through faith for the salvation to be revealed in the last time" (I Pet. 1:5). We cannot attain to perfection here in this age, but we pursue after holiness. Our Christian life is marked by many 'lows'-- even though God in his mercy may give us an occasional 'high'. We are confident, however, that he who has begun the good work in us will bring it to

completion in the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6).

Included in this tension between the already and the not yet is also our bodily existence. So often our spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. We grow tired and weary, and we become ill and some day, should the Lord tarry, we will die. And while the powers of the age to come break through to us at times in miraculous healings, we should not fool ourselves into thinking that the fulness of heavenly bliss is available to us in the here and now.

Not only does creation groan in travail, "but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:22,23):

I am of the opinion that our Brotherhood should refrain from getting engrossed in speculations about those aspects of eschatology about which God has not found it necessary to give us more light. He has given us sufficient light about the future so that we can live and serve and suffer with joy and confidence during this time of waiting, until the day dawns, and all shadows flee away.

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