

“The Essentials”

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love.

Essential #1 2

Jesus will return

This is my final essay in the series of essential beliefs of the Christian faith. It may be helpful at the beginning of this essay to review the previous essentials. Here is the list:

There is a single God, good, loving and in control (monotheism)

God is love: lover, beloved and the love between (the Trinity)

God made all that there is, and made every person special. (Creation)

God has had a definitive conversation with humanity (the Scriptures)

God gives us a gift that reconciles us with Him in both mercy and righteousness (Grace)

God calls together a people (the Church)

God became human in Jesus (the Incarnation)

Jesus reconciled us to God at the Cross (the Atonement)

Jesus came to life again to offer us new life (Resurrection)

Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to his people

Jesus instituted simple rituals to help us enter God's presence (the Sacraments)

The final essential belief of the Christian faith is that Jesus will return to bring human history to a conclusion. Lest you think this belief is in a mere metaphorical or symbolic return, let me go on to describe the further aspects of Jesus's return as they have been proclaimed by most churches throughout the world in all times and places:

Jesus will return *personally*—He will return in glorified bodily form and with a glorified personality.

Jesus will return to *judge* “the living and the dead”—His second coming will be to set right all the injustice and oppression and to reconcile all peoples to each other and himself.

Jesus will return to *take his followers to be with Himself forever*—the promise is not just that we will live forever or that we will be “in Heaven” but that we will enjoy intimate communion with God the Father through Jesus and that the friendship itself will be life forever and “heaven.” To be with Jesus is to live forever in heaven.

I have a confession to make. I have always thought that the Second Coming of Jesus was the most improbable and difficult of the Biblical teachings to believe. My internal theme song is one that Evie Tournquist recorded about 30 years ago that said “If heaven never were promised to me, neither God's promise to live eternally, it's been worth just having the Lord in my life—I was living in a world of darkness and he brought me the light.” My secret attitude has been; even if Jesus never returned and we were never taken to heaven, isn't life here on earth with Christ much better than life without Him?

Furthermore, I have always been a bit embarrassed by people who take the Second Coming too seriously—think of the caricature of the bearded guy between sandwich boards that read “Repent, for the End is Near!” During my ministry I have had several of my parishioners approach me in great excitement with some sort of book or tract that proves that Jesus's return is imminent, usually to occur in a particular year (we can't know “the day or the hour”, Jesus said, but can we know the year?). I always sigh internally and wait patiently for the appointed time to pass, so I can console my parishioner.

But there is something that makes me very uncomfortable with my own inclination to make the Second Coming an optional belief: the entire New Testament. I have always believed that the Christian faith cannot be authentic if it chooses to ignore large portions of the Scripture. If you look through the New Testament seeking for passages concerning the Second Coming you will find that no other essential belief is mentioned more frequently in more New Testament books. Every single New Testament writer mentions Jesus's return, and the language and ideas they use to describe the event are remarkably consistent.

In fact, this consistency is so remarkable that instead of selecting a single passage to illustrate this essential (as I have with the others), I have chosen to put forth the highlights from each New Testament writer, and allow my argument to be advanced by the Scriptures themselves. This is not a brief reading, but I believe it is amazingly worthwhile:

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, we 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. Matthew 25:42-44

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 to when he returns. Matthew 25:45-46

Again the high priest asked him, "are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?"

"I am," said Jesus, "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of Heaven." Mark 14:61-62

So when they met together, they 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. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Acts 1:6-8

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "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." Acts 1:9-11

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. 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. I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." John 14:1-4

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.

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 Thes 4:13-17

But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. Hebrews 9:26-28

Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers, ore you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! James 5:7-9

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 1 Peter 4:12-13

Dear friends, now we are the children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure. 1 John 3:2-3

But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in you most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.

Jude 20-21

"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."

He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen. Rev 22:12-13, 20-21

Allow me to summarize what all of these passages together say about the Second Coming of Jesus. In the first place, before Jesus returns there will be great suffering in the world. Although the suffering, “wars and rumors of wars” does not serve as a predictor of the moment in which Jesus returns, Christians who are going through suffering have always clung to the hope that their difficulties will be cut short by Divine intervention to bring history to a just conclusion.

In the second place, the New Testament says that Satan will attempt to counterfeit Jesus’s return by offering false messiahs and false fulfillments of history. Every appearance of the Virgin, of Jesus, or of Space Aliens in Roswell, New Mexico, has to be taken with a grain of salt by Christians. No technological advance, archaeological discovery, political victory or diplomatic negotiation of peace will usher in a Golden Age. Christians do believe that the Kingdom of God is at work now and for that reason we are to be activists, seeking to improve civil rights, the environment, and the expressions of the Kingdom through the arts and sciences. But we are never to take our activism *too* seriously, because every victory of virtue in this world is only temporary.

Thirdly, Jesus will come *in person*. None of the New Testament authors is free to say that His coming will be only symbolic or spiritual. For some of the New Testament writers the Second Coming is clearly a painful topic (especially for the Gospel of John). Before his Resurrection Jesus seems to have believed (remember, He Himself said that even the Son did not know the hour, only the Father) that His return would be after a very short number of years, and all of his first disciples believed that He would return within their lifetimes. For all of them the reunion with Jesus in person was so real they could taste it.

But Jesus himself and his disciples were consistent in declaring that the return would be *unexpected*. No one could set a time for the Second Coming except the Father and he would make sure that the Gospel was preached in the whole world (a much larger world than the early Christians knew) and that all people would have a chance to respond to the Good News (a lot more people than any one of the disciples could have imagined).

Fifthly, they all expected Jesus to return *in judgement*. This conviction was rooted not only in what Jesus himself had said but in the Old Testament concept of the *Day of the Lord*, the moment in which God appeared in history to work justice. Indeed, unless God breaks into human history to break the power of evil, there is very little point in believing in a good and righteous God.

Finally, the disciples of Jesus believed that their reunion with Him “at the end of the age,” would be a permanent reunion in which intimacy with God would enter a new dimension. They offered different visions of what Heaven would be like, but none of them seem to have doubted that the return of Jesus would inaugurate eternal life and perpetual happiness.

The disciples did not believe these things simply because they engaged in wishful thinking. They believed these things because Jesus himself had birthed and nurtured their expectations. Even very skeptical scholars who say we can know very little about the historical Jesus admit that the End Times was one of the principal themes of His teaching. It is as though Jesus says to us through the New Testament, “I know that my delay in returning makes it difficult for you to believe that I will come back for you. You have already put in such effort and experienced such grace in believing all the other essential teachings concerning myself and my Father, and there is only one more step. Can I ask you to believe just one more thing about me, based not on your logical reason (for you cannot be *convinced* I will return) or even on your feelings (for you often *feel* that I will never come) but on your *desire*, that you so badly want for me to be with you that you can taste it.

Consider the practical implications of believing this essential. Hope that is *personal* has an entirely different quality than hope that is *theoretical*. If I am on the top of my house because there has been a flood, my hope of rescue is very different if I am awaiting to be plucked from my perch by *anonymous* rescuers than if I know Jim Smith, my cousin who is a captain in the local fire department, will be out looking for me. The conviction that someone will set things *right* makes an enormous difference to my daily life. I don’t have to settle scores with people or be consumed by the concern that I am being treated unfairly. Most importantly, the conviction that Jesus may return to call me to account for my treatment of others at any moment, will make a huge difference in the way I conduct myself.

This last reason is the one I most want to hang on to. I want to conserve a healthy respect for the Lord's ability to hold me accountable, because I understand that if I have a deep conviction that He will not return to hold me accountable, that conviction cannot fail to produce in me an indifference towards the people I serve. I will inevitably become the kind of minister (and person) who seeks to profit from each relationship rather than to serve in each relationship.

Can we believe it? Can we believe that Jesus Christ will return at any moment for us who have entrusted our lives to him? One's convictions make a profound difference to one's life, and this one can make perhaps the most profound difference of all. Let us, then, choose to live with hope, like children arriving at a strange airport with the certainty that someone who loves them will be there to meet them.