

Second Thoughts about the Second Coming

*Understanding the End Times,
Our Future, and Christian Hope*

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Acknowledgments

Every book has an origin story, especially one that is jointly authored. This book is no different. While we could go back to years of friendship as the foundation, the book was conceived over a breakfast in the fall of 2019. While Bob was on sabbatical, Ron had come up to Troy, Michigan, to lead a workshop with the church Bob served—Central Woodward Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Ron suggested that he and Bob write a book together. Bob, knowing that Ron had recently published a commentary on Revelation, suggested they write a book about eschatology (last things). The rest is history.

When it comes to writing a book, it takes something like a village to bring it to fruition. This is where we might thank our agents—but we don't have agents. We are thankful that the folks at Westminster John Knox Press, principally its editor-in-chief, Bob Ratcliff, liked the idea. Then when he shared the idea with the marketing people, they liked it as well. The response was positive, but they wanted us to write a book not for scholars or preachers, but for a general audience. That was our idea as well, but they helped us hone the project so it would meet the needs of the people in churches like the ones where Bob and Ron have taught the Bible over the years. We're grateful for their advice and guidance along the way.

We must thank the congregations where we've preached and taught Bible studies. We appreciate them for their curiosity and

for asking good questions that have pushed us to refine our own thinking.

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Finally, as this is a work intended for the church, we thank God for being ever present in our endeavors. May this book be a gift to the church and honor the God we serve in Jesus Christ.

Blessings,
Bob Cornwall and Ron Allen

Preface

The idea for this book began in the real-life experiences of the two authors, Bob and Ron. Ron was a guest leading a Bible study in a local congregation when a participant asked a question that both of us have been asked many times: “What does the Bible really teach about the second coming of Jesus?” Several other participants nodded their heads as if to say, “We have that question too.” Ron asked the participant to clarify why the question was important. The response indicated that several participants in the study were friends with members of another congregation that lays great emphasis on the second coming. “Over there, you would think the Bible is not about anything else,” commented one of the people in the room. Another added, “They find the second coming everywhere in the Bible—not only in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Paul, the book of Revelation, but also in Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and those little prophets whose names I cannot pronounce.” Someone at the other end of the table observed, “We don’t hear much about the second coming in our church.” “So,” the first questioner picked up, “please tell us what the Bible *really* teaches about the second coming of Jesus.”

Bob’s experience with the topic of the second coming goes back to his youth. Through music such as Larry Norman’s “I Wish We’d All Been Ready,” books such as Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and sermons at church, he heard the message that we were living in the last days before Jesus returns, so be prepared, because you don’t want to be left behind. As a pastor

teaching Bible studies, Bob also discovered deep interest among church members when it comes to questions about the end of the age and life after death. When he asked what biblical books they wanted to study, they asked for Daniel and Revelation. They wanted to know how to read these books responsibly.

Concern about the future persists, as seen in the continued popularity of the *Left Behind* series of books and movies as expressions of contemporary belief that we are living in the last days before Jesus' return. The message of these books and movies, along with others like them, is that we must be ready for Jesus' return or face the consequences. The phenomenal sales of these materials strongly suggest that Christians and the public at large have questions about what the future holds. Likewise, in the early twenty-first century, widespread concern about the environmental crisis, political polarization, economic instability, and continuing violence around the world and at home contribute to a sense of anxiety about the future. For many Christians, belief in the second coming of Jesus offers a sense of hope for a future beyond this life.

Given this environment, Bob and Ron have noticed a curious phenomenon, especially in mainline Protestant churches such as the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). On the one hand, as we have noted, many people in these congregations—and many others—are curious about the second coming, as well as about life after death. They want to know the answer to questions like these: “Will God do something to make things right?” “What happens when I die?” “Will I see my mother and father in heaven?” On the other hand, preachers and teachers seldom directly address such questions.

In this season of uncertainty in the culture and the church, we believe it's important that the church think seriously not only about the second coming but more broadly about what the Christian faith has to say about the future. Therefore, we believe two things need to occur. (1) Christians should identify what

people in the Bible and the Christian tradition believed about these things. (2) Christians then need to identify what we believe about the second coming, life after death, and the hope for the future. What Christians believe about what lies ahead will contribute to how we live in the present.

We hope this book helps readers—as individuals and in groups—to achieve greater clarity as to what they believe about the future. We try to describe as clearly as possible a wide range of viewpoints, and when we disagree with a viewpoint, we try to speak respectfully about it. We hope to open windows of understanding that allow readers to gain a better sense of each viewpoint. We seek, as far as possible, to let each perspective speak for itself. Of course, we raise questions and compare and contrast positions, but we try to do so in a conversational spirit that provides readers with information that allows them to come to their own conclusions.

We tackle a set of complicated theological issues in this book. Because it's impossible to completely avoid using technical theological terminology, when we use a technical term the first time—like “eschatology,” a term that appears regularly in the book—we provide a definition (often in parentheses). We've also created a glossary for quick reference to important terms. We hope that this book will contribute to a better understanding of an important topic and offer a word of encouragement when it comes to how we perceive the future as Christians.

Introduction

We try not to predict the future in this book, because neither of us knows what the future looks like. However, we do try to explain how the churches have interpreted matters such as the second coming and life after death from the biblical period to the present. We don't try to convince readers to adopt a particular point of view. Instead, we outline major points of view from the past and the present relating to both the second coming of Jesus and life beyond death. In doing so, we seek to help readers think about the strengths and weaknesses of the various viewpoints so that they can make their own decisions about what they believe on such matters.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., the father of the famous justice of the Supreme Court Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., is reported to have said, "Some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good." To be sure, Christians and others can be distracted by thinking about things to come. But what we believe about the future and its possibilities affects how we live in the present. And how we live in the present affects the kind of future we will have.

The Second Coming Is Part of a Bigger Discussion about God's Ultimate Purposes

In much of Christianity, the phrase “the second coming” refers to Jesus’ future return to earth from heaven, accompanied by angels and great cosmic disturbance. This view often envisions violent actions that bring about the defeat of evil. After these things occur, God will establish a renewed world. Many Christians think this is the *only* way to interpret the idea of the second coming. But is this true?

While many emphasize Jesus’ second coming when they think about God’s future for creation, this is only one aspect of a larger discussion about God’s ultimate purposes. The theological term or category that covers this discussion is “eschatology” (pronounced *es-ka-TA-lo-jee*). The word comes from two Greek words: *eschatos* means “last,” and *logos* means “thinking about” or “study of.” The word “eschatology” refers to the study of what people believe about last things or, more broadly, God’s ultimate purposes for humanity and the universe itself. As we shall see in this book, some people believe that God’s ultimate purposes will be accomplished within history, while others believe God’s purposes will be accomplished beyond history.

The second coming, as we described it above, is part of a particular form of eschatology called apocalyptic eschatology. Readers will recognize that the word “apocalyptic” is closely related to the word “apocalypse,” which we often associate with destruction. News reporters might refer to a war zone scarred by burned buildings, blackened trees, and dead bodies as an “apocalyptic scene.” However, when it comes to the Bible and Christian reflection, it is too limiting to think of the apocalyptic event only in destructive terms. In Greek, the basic meaning of “apocalyptic” is “to reveal.” Some writers in both the ancient and contemporary worlds use the word “apocalyptic” to refer to God revealing God’s ultimate purposes through cataclysmic events that bring the present age to an end and inaugurate a new age.

In the early Christian movement, most believers expected the second coming to be a pivotal, apocalyptic event marking the end of the present world and the beginning of a new world. This new era is often called the Realm (Kingdom) of God. In this apocalyptic way of thinking, the old world is characterized by idolatry, animosity, injustice, violence, scarcity, and death, while the Realm of God will be a world of authentic worship, love, justice, peace, abundance, and eternal life. Some first-century believers placed less emphasis on a singular cosmically transforming event and more emphasis on the soul making a journey to heaven. Both groups believed that aspects of the future hope were partially realized in the present.

There are several terms that Christians associate with such eschatology that we use in this book. These terms include “Kingdom (Realm) of God,” “last days,” “last things,” “end times,” “great transformation,” and “consummation.” When we say we have “second thoughts about the second coming,” we have in mind not only the event of Jesus’ return at the end of the age, but also the larger set of concerns related to the coming of the Realm of God and the fulfillment of God’s ultimate purposes (eschatology!). The time has come to think clearly about what we believe about the future, the consequences of those beliefs, and how we should respond to what the future might hold for us.

Three Things to Keep in Mind When Considering the Second Coming

When we consider the second coming, we should keep three things in mind.

First, language about the second coming comes from the world of the Bible, which in many ways is very different from our world today. So we need to pay attention to the differences between the contexts of the ancient world and our own.

Second, we should avoid speaking of *the* biblical perspective or *the* Christian perspective, on the second coming specifically or on God’s eschatological purposes more generally. The Bible

contains different voices that speak in different ways. Christians need to figure out what to do with such differences.

Third, Christian tradition, as it has developed over the centuries, also offers diverse perspectives on what the future holds for us. We are the heirs of these diverse perspectives, some of which no longer hold true for some people today, while other perspectives continue to speak to how we think on such matters. Even as we consider tradition, we need to bring into the conversation knowledge from the contemporary world. Context matters with respect to how these views have developed and continue to develop.

Putting these things together, we can decide what we *truly* believe about the future. What we believe about the future often goes a long way toward determining the way we live in the present. If we have an optimistic view of the future, we may give ourselves more fully to the present. If we have a negative view of the future, we may step back from taking responsibility for the present.

What You Will Find in the Book

This book is organized chronologically. We follow themes related to the second coming and the afterlife from their initial appearance in Jewish and Christian communities, through their interpretation and reinterpretation in history, until we reach the present.

- In Section One, we focus on God's ultimate purposes in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. We concentrate on Daniel, Paul, the four Gospels, 2 Peter, Jude, and Revelation.
- In Section Two, we trace the two main streams of thought through history beginning in the second century CE. One stream is associated with Eastern Christianity (Greek/Syriac) beginning with Origen and taking us through the aftermath of the fall of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire in the fifteenth century. We've divided the Western (Latin) stream into two chapters. One chapter takes the reader from the third century CE through the Middle Ages to the eve of the Reformation.

The other chapter begins with the Reformation in the sixteenth century and takes things up to the beginning of the nineteenth century.

- In Section Three, we focus on interpretations of God's ultimate purposes that have emerged over the past two centuries and remain popular to the present moment. These interpretations can be categorized as premillennialism/dispensationalism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism.
- In Section Four, we consider several current perspectives on Christian eschatology. These include realized eschatology, theology of hope, liberation theology, open and relational theologies, and contemporary Orthodox theology.
- While throughout the book we lift up beliefs about the life to come, we bring these ideas and beliefs together in Section Five, so readers can easily compare and contrast them.
- In the appendixes you will find the glossary noted above, which defines key technical theological words and ideas found in this book, as well as a study guide outlining six sessions for small group use.

What Do Bob and Ron Think?

Bob has an eclectic theology and way of thinking about the church. He grew up on the West Coast, where his journey took him through Pentecostal, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal families. Since seminary, he has been a member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the denomination in which he was ordained.¹ When it comes to the second coming, he draws from several perspectives, including apocalyptic theology (Jürgen Moltmann), liberation theology, open theism, and Eastern Orthodoxy.

Ron grew up in the Ozark Mountains in southeast Missouri and is a lifelong member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Because the Disciples do not have formal creeds, they don't have a normative understanding of the second coming. One of their founders, Alexander Campbell, was a postmillennialist. Another founder, Barton Stone, adopted that view after

toying with the premillennialism of William Miller early in the nineteenth century (see p. 78). Ron grew up with a historic open-ended approach to the second coming (pp. 91–94). In adulthood, he evolved into a process thinker. Process theology doesn't anticipate a single cosmic event in which Jesus interrupts history to replace the present world with a new one, but believes that God is ever and always present, offering every moment the opportunity to embrace as much love, justice, peace, abundance, and life as that moment affords.

Bob and Ron write with respect for other points of view. In this book, we seek to represent all perspectives fairly. We aim to avoid caricaturing and dismissing others. Indeed, disrespect, associated with caricature, name-calling, and dismissal, works against the values of the fruit of the second coming. We also bring differing professional approaches to this conversation. While both of us are ordained Disciples ministers, Ron trained as a biblical scholar, focusing on the New Testament and preaching. He taught these things for thirty-seven years at Christian Theological Seminary. Bob spent the past two decades as a local pastor but trained as a historical theologian/church historian. The book emerged as a conversation between the two of us; so we take responsibility not only for the parts we gave primary authorship to but for the whole of the book.

Online Resources for Preaching

Although we wrote this book with a general audience in mind, we hope preachers will find the material in the book of interest. So, for preachers, we've developed two online resources to help preachers engage the second coming in the pulpit. One of these resources is *Sermon Series on the Second Coming*, which includes both a general orientation to the subject and suggestions for sermon series based on biblical texts and topics.

The second resource is *Preaching the Second Coming from the Christian Year and the Lectionary*. This guide calls attention to ways in which expectation for the second coming shapes the Year

and the lectionary. Preachers may prefer to frame this concern more broadly, as the expectation for the Realm of God or the fulfillment of God's purposes for humankind and nature. In any event, this guide also highlights days and seasons in the Christian Year, as well as texts in the lectionary that provide natural opportunities for thinking with the congregation about how to understand and respond to these texts and themes.

You can find both resources at [www.wjkbooks.com/Second Coming](http://www.wjkbooks.com/SecondComing).

Sending the Book Forward in Prayer

In this book, we emphasize diverse understandings of eschatology in history and today. Yet, despite the diversity, all Christian forms of thinking about the future known to us presume that God ultimately yearns for conditions of existence (whether in this world or some other world) to align more closely with God's unrelenting desire for love, grace, justice, peace, freedom, and abundance for all. We offer this book out of our love for the church and the wider community. Therefore, we offer it with the prayer that it can help us recognize that God yearns to empower us to join with God in doing our part to bring God's Realm into fruition in this life and/or the next (depending on your point of view).

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