

The Return of Jesus Christ
Revelation 22:6 – 21
Fairview Presbyterian Church
February 12, 2012

We continue our exploration of the seven essentials of the Reformed faith, as articulated by the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Fairview Presbyterian Church is in the process of transitioning from the Presbyterian Church (USA) to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. We believe that the Evangelical Presbyterian Church will be a better ecclesiastical match for Fairview. To that end, we are exploring the essentials, as articulated by the EPC.

Today we look at the penultimate essential, the sixth, affirming the return of Jesus Christ. The essential reads,

Jesus Christ will come again to the earth – personally, visibly, and bodily – to judge the living and the dead, and to consummate history and eternal plan of God. “Even so, come, Lord Jesus.” (Revelation 22:20)

As we have done with each previous tenet, let us look at each clause individually to see what is affirmed.

First, we note the affirmation, Jesus Christ will return to earth.

Jesus Christ will return to earth

⁷“And behold, I am coming soon.

Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus Christ ascended into heaven. He took his place at the right hand of God the Father. After Jesus ascended and disappeared from the disciple’s sight, two men (angels?) appeared to the disciples. Acts 1:10 – 11 tells us, And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”¹ In other words, the resurrection and ascension are not the final works of Jesus Christ. We live in the church age. Jesus Christ is building his church. He continues to be at work in our world, primarily through the work of the church. This age will one day be drawn to a close. The event that will mark the end of this age will be the return of Jesus Christ.

In Revelation 20 John describes the church age in vivid imagery.

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain.² And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years,³ and threw him into the pit, and

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Ac 1:10–11). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.²

The church age will last for a *thousand years*. This is not to be understood literally as a specific number of years, but rather to delineate an age, an epoch, a long period of time. During the church age, Satan is bound. What is meant by this is not that he is unable to make mischief and trouble, but that Satan is no longer able to deceive the nations. He cannot stop the spread of the church. He cannot thwart Jesus Christ's work through the church. As we have mentioned before, near the end of time, Satan will be released and his power to deceive the nations will be restored and, it appears, the church will all but cease to exist, for a time. Mercifully, this will be *for a little while*. After this time, Jesus Christ will return.

The tenet makes several affirmations about the nature of Jesus Christ's return, based upon biblical teaching. The first is that he will return personally.

He will return personally

¹⁶“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”

The Christian message is a message in time and space. It unfolds in history. There is certainly a timeless, spiritual component to the Christian gospel. The message of Christ is for all times and places. But, the message of Christ is founded upon what Christ accomplished in time and space, in human history. As we confess in the Apostle's Creed, we acknowledge that Christ “suffered under Pontius Pilate” – Pilate being a particular governor of Judea during the Roman Empire. The message of Christ is rooted in history.

This is important because there is a natural tendency and temptation among religious folk to spiritualize things, divorcing the message of the gospel from its historical roots. Jesus becomes simply an outstanding teacher, a moral example, or an impersonal spiritual force for good in the world. I have in my office a brochure that reads,

“People use many different names for spirituality. One name is God. Others are Greater Truth, Higher Power, Voice Within, Inner Light, Loving Spirit, Holy Spirit, and Infinite Wisdom....Ask yourself these questions about your own spirituality: What name do I use when I call upon my spirituality? How do I define my spirituality?”

A week or so ago a friend of mine asked for prayer for a specific need on his Facebook page. I wrote and sent him a prayer, posting it to his page. A little while later I noticed that another of his friends wrote on his page, “*I am sending positive energy to you.*” I am not quite sure how you do that, but it appears that for secular folk, prayer to God is

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Re 20:1–3). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

replaced by psychic sentiment, good will, and the *sending* of spiritual energy one to another.

In contrast, the Christian message is that Jesus Christ will one day return personally. He is a person, not an abstract spiritual force. He is a specific person, not an ill-defined spirituality. He is a person, not an unnamed higher power. This is the first thing we affirm: his return will be personal. The second is that his return will be visible.

He will return visibly

¹³ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

The fancy word for the study of End Times is Eschatology. The dominant view of eschatology for most evangelicals today is called Dispensationalism. One key element of dispensationalist theology is that it makes a distinction between the Rapture and the Return of Jesus Christ. Dispensationalists believe that there will be a time when Christ's people, the church, will be raptured, mysteriously taken to heaven, while the unsaved remain on earth to endure a literal seven year period of Tribulation. I should confess that, in my teenage years, I briefly embraced dispensational theology. I even placed a sticker on the passenger side of the dashboard of my first car, a Camaro, which read: "In the event of Rapture, this car will be unmanned." (Sigh.) Dispensationalists affirm that it is Jesus Christ who affects this rapture of his church from the world. In contrast, classic Christian theology has always seen the Rapture and the Return of Jesus Christ as one and the same event. The remaining church is raptured when the world ends and Christ returns. Dispensationalists divide these into two separate events, separated by a seven year period.

The difficulty with the dispensationalist view is that it has Jesus Christ returning to rescue his church, but doing so secretly. In the dispensationalist view, the church sees Christ, but the unsaved world does not. The Jehovah's Witness sect is another group that believes in a secret return of Jesus Christ, believing that he Jesus' rule *began* in 1914 and that *he came to the temple of Jehovah in 1919*. (It is not at all clear to me what they mean by these affirmations.) But of course, the Bible knows nothing of a *secret* return of Jesus Christ. The opening chapter of Revelation tells us of Christ's return, (Revelation 1:7) Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of earth will wail on account of him. When Jesus Christ returns, it will be a visible return. Everyone will know it. When Jesus Christ returns there will be no misunderstanding regarding who he is or what his return means. Remember, the Rapture refers to the church on earth at the time of Christ's return being mysteriously taken to heaven in an instant, in a twinkling of the eye. We need to ask the question, "What is the purpose of the Rapture? Why is God going to do this?" The reason, the purpose of the Rapture, is to enable God's people living at the time of Christ's return, to join Christ's entourage, his triumphal descent from heaven to earth. Christ will return with all the heavenly host, and all the elect of God through the ages. The Rapture's purpose is so that the church in existence at the time of the Second Coming will have an opportunity to take their place in line.

Jesus Christ will return. He will return personally and visibly. Next, he will return bodily.

He will return bodily

⁶ And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.”

We are embodied creatures. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead was a bodily resurrection. Jesus suffered in his body. He was buried. And on the third day, he rose bodily from the grave. When he ascended into heaven on the fortieth day, he ascended bodily into heaven. Jesus Christ is God incarnate. He is God in human flesh. Human flesh is in heaven. Jesus Christ remains in his bodily form. His resurrected body is new and improved, but it is still a body. The biblical message is that as Jesus left this world when he ascended to heaven, so he will return when he brings the world to an end.

The affirmation that Christ will return bodily protects us from theological error. There are those who say that Christ returns whenever someone prays to receive Christ as Lord and Savior. True enough, certainly, a spiritual sense, but the return of Jesus Christ will be an event in history. There are those who say that Christ returns as the work and influence of the church spreads throughout the world. Again, true, but we also remember that the Second Coming is more than the success and spread of the church. That Jesus will return bodily is an affirmation that this event, like the incarnation and the resurrection, will be an event in space and time, in history.

Jesus Christ will return. He will return personally, visibly and bodily. At his return, he will officiate at the final judgment.

He will officiate at the final judgment

¹² “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done.

Two weeks ago, the Obama administration issued a requirement that all private medical insurance plans include coverage for abortions. This is a frontal assault on Christian religious convictions. The idea that the government would mandate that Christian organizations provide medical coverage for practices that the church considers immoral is appalling. We live in a world in which people do not wish to be held accountable for their actions. As a people, we no longer share a common vision of what constitutes a wise and virtuous life. As a nation we no longer share a common moral vision: a shared grasp of what is right and what is wrong. The bonds of society are weakening, unraveling. It is more and more true today in America what was said of Israel in the time of the Judges: everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

However, God has created this world in a manner that reflects his goodness and character. He is not indifferent to the moral decisions of individuals, organizations, and governments. The Bible is clear: there will be a Day of Judgment. At some point, we will hear God’s verdict upon the moral actions of our lives. In verse 12, of Revelation 22,

Jesus is speaking, and he declares, “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. The word *recompense* means to *pay back in kind*. Christ’s judgment will be perfect and complete.

A sad by-product of the declining influence of the Christian faith upon our world is that many people no longer fear God. People dismiss the idea, the possibility of judgment. It never occurs to many folk that they will one day be answerable to God for their words, actions, and moral decisions. For such folk, the Return of Jesus Christ will not be a happy day.

Talking about the final judgment is a necessary facet of Christian teaching and theology. But it is just that – a facet. The reality of judgment is part of the teaching of the Bible. Thankfully, judgment is not the final word regarding the return of Jesus Christ. At Jesus’ return, he will consummate God’s plan and purpose in history.

He will consummate God’s plan and purpose in history

¹⁴ Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.

The Return of Jesus Christ is the end of history as we know it, but it is not the end of the story of God’s plan and purpose for those who love and serve him. The Bible speaks in metaphors to describe heaven. In First Corinthians 2:9 Paul admits that it is difficult for us to image what heaven will be like. “What no eye has seen, no ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.” The Bible does tell us some things. It tells us what will not be in heaven: no tears, sorrow, death, pain, darkness, sin, temples, the sun or moon. Among the activities of heaven will be the worship of God and the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. When John describes the New Jerusalem, he speaks of pearls, gold and gemstones. Whatever it will be like, it will be a place of greatness and wonder.

Heaven is where Christ is. The great hope of heaven is that of the beatific vision. First John 3:2 tells us, “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” We do not see God now because our sinfulness blinds us to him. But, we are God’s children now, as First John tells us. Our hope is that in heaven, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, we will see God in all his magnificence and glory. Whatever else heaven may be about, the joy and privilege of seeing God in his glory is our highest hope.

We have spoken about the return of Christ. We have spoken of Judgment Day and of the hope of heaven. As we close, let me say again that what matters in life and death is that we are not our own, but belong to Jesus Christ. The ability to stand on the Day of Judgment is not based upon what we do. It is not a matter of our good works needing to outweigh our bad works. There is nothing within us that will enable to stand before God’s holiness. Rather, what matters is to be in Christ. Those who will stand on Judgment Day will do so because of faith in Jesus Christ. A similar truth is confessed

regarding heaven. The hope of heaven is for those who are in Christ. Heaven is a gift given by God, to those who are his people. What matters is a person's relationship to Jesus Christ.

Where are you this day? Have you turned in faith to Jesus Christ? Do you trust in him? Do you believe in him as your Lord and Savior?

Turn to Christ. Admit your need for him. Believe in him and be saved. And cry, "Maranatha!" Come Lord Jesus.

Say "Amen" Somebody!

Revelation 22:6 – 21

Jesus Is Coming

⁶ And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.”

⁷ “And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

⁸ I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, ⁹ but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.”

¹⁰ And he said to me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. ¹¹ Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.”

¹² “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. ¹³ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

¹⁴ Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. ¹⁵ Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

¹⁶ “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”

¹⁷ The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.

¹⁸ I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, ¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

²⁰ He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

²¹ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen. ³

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Re 22:6–21). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.