The Return of the Christ:
Is it a Present Reality?

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The three chapters of this booklet reproduce the substance of three talks given at Boston a few months after the meetings of the World Council of Churches of Christ in Evanston, Ill., during August, 1954. At those meetings part of the discussion was over the hope of the Lord's Return. The discussion, it was recognized by all, was by no means concluded, and the talks reproduced here are an effort to present what the writer's church, The Church of the New Jerusalem, has to offer for discussion.

The Return of the Christ:
Is it a Present Reality?

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As an idea in the Bible or in theology, the subject of the Lord's Second Coming can hardly be expected to have the attention of many besides students in those fields. The event, on the other hand, would or could engage the attention of any and all. What could have more significance to Christians and indeed for the world than the Return of the Christ? In these pages it is not merely a view of the Lord's Return that is to be presented, though that be a view gathered from the Scripture promises; a possible fulfilment of the predictions is to be brought to the reader's attention. Fulfilment, the writer is convinced, is a present and powerful reality. I think that the Lord is dealing now in his Second Coming with his following, in judgment, in the grant of further light, and in inspiration to a renewed and deepened Christian experience. His Coming affects Christendom more immediately, but of course concerns all mankind.

Until a possible fulfilment has made itself known for what it is, or is an acknowledged reality, consideration of it has to be won by showing that it answers to the predictions of it. So the Lord's First Coming or the reality of it was originally urged upon men; did it not fulfill Scripture hope and prediction? Before long, it commanded conviction for what it proved to be. First of all, then, let us examine the predictions that the Lord would come again. Did he draw a picture of his Return? What is the picture? He himself, we know, is the Author of the hope that he will come again. Christians could hope that he would return because of what he was and is, and because it would be such a blessing and, as many think, an instant rescue from chaos and calamity, were he to reappear. But he himself cherished the hope and
excited it in his disciples. Next to keeping him, they longed for him to return. Utterances of his own, then, are the warrant of our hope. What expectations and what ideas of his Return do his utterances — and any related Scriptures — allow us to entertain or encourage us to have?

The Christ rarely spoke an extended discourse, but on this subject he did. The first record we have of it is in the earliest of the four Gospels, that of Mark, where it occupies the thirteenth chapter. Matthew also records it, with some elaboration, in his twenty-fourth chapter. Luke, in his twenty-first chapter and elsewhere, reproduces parts of it. Known to students of the Bible as “the little apocalypse,” this discourse is not readily understood. The cast of thought and the manner of expression are foreign to us. There are other difficulties with it. Only four of the disciples heard the discourse. They reported it, and of course reported it as they understood it and recalled it. Then the writers of the Gospels (two of whom — Mark and Luke — were not disciples, and none of whom heard the Lord speak) gave the discourse to the world as it was reported to them and as they comprehended it. Between our reading and what the Lord said, therefore, we have the understanding of the four disciples and then of the three evangelists. This may account, as we shall see, for some difficulties in the discourse.

In all three Gospels the discourse is substantially the same, however, and whatever the difficulties with it, we have the heart of what the Lord said, his assurance that he would come again, and the general picture which he drew of his Return.

Suppose we revive the occasion on which the Lord spoke about his Return. It is the last week of his life on earth — how natural that he should speak then about coming again! The first day of that week he had made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The next day he had rested in the quiet and hospitable home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Bethany. Now, the third day, he has been in the Temple again, teaching hour after hour. The afternoon has worn on, and he and his disciples leave for the Mount of Olives across the Kidron Valley. As the little company starts off and the Temple looms high and large behind them, one of the disciples cries, “Master, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!” (Mark 13:1.) The Lord’s gaze turns to the Temple; how sobering his comment is! “Seest thou these great buildings? there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.” (Mark 13:2.)

Verily I say unto you, that this generation shall not pass, till all these things be done.

(Mark 13:30; Matthew 24:34.)

But of that day and hour knoweth no man; no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father. (Mark 13:32; Matthew 24:36.)

If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes.

For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side,

And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in
the one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation. (Luke 19:42-44.)

This, then, the disciples hear now for the third time. We can imagine that as they trudge after the Lord up the slope of Olivet, they are amazed, depressed, and sunk in thought. Are some of them so sunk in thought that they continue walking on when four of them come to a halt beside the Christ? John and James, Peter and Andrew find themselves alone with him. They gaze back over the valley to the Temple, large at even this distance, and gleaming in the sunset. Is all that magnificence to be swept away? "Tell us," they bid the Master, "when shall these things be?" (Mark 13:4.)

Mark records only this query about the destruction of the Temple and the leveling of the city. Matthew says that the four asked a further question, about the Lord's Return. The disciples would naturally connect the Lord's Return with a crisis. "And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" (Matthew 24:3.) This was their further question. While Mark does not quote it, he as well as Matthew records the Lord's answer to it. He plainly implies that the question was asked.

The Lord has seated himself. He speaks both of the destruction of Jerusalem and of his coming again. His thought moves back and forth between the two subjects. He is speaking of the second before he is done with the first, in some ways, it appears, the first is typical of the second. We have to take care when he refers to the destruction of Jerusalem, and when it is his Return to which he refers. We have to be the more careful because the disciples or the evangelists or both, tending to tie the two events closely together, may not always have distinguished between the references or held to the sequences of the Lord's discourse. For example, as the early Christians in general did, they considered both events to be imminent. As for the one happening, the overthrow of city and Temple, of this the Lord unquestionably speaks as imminent. It will occur, he says, in the lifetime of his listeners. He speaks words of warning about it. When armies begin to appear in the neighborhood of Jerusalem, "then know," he says, "that the desolation thereof is nigh." Then let all flee for their lives who can; a siege will set in with untold suffering. He speaks words of compassion. May none of those fleeing be heavy with child, nor may the time be winter with its hardships, or the Sabbath, when so many things to help oneself cannot be done. The destruction of the city did come as soon as predicted. About forty years later Titus, son of the Roman emperor and general of the armies, did away with Temple and city. The siege he laid to the city lasted five months and was as bitter as the Lord had predicted. Hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children died of starvation or disease or both as for all those months they were "kept in on every side."

We are concerned, of course, not with the fall of Jerusalem so long ago, but with the Lord's Return. He spoke of both events because he had been asked about both, but was there not another reason to do so? Whatever connection the disciples saw between the two occurrences, was not the Lord treating the first event as typical in some ways of the second, and drawing parallels between them? The fate of Jerusalem was a judgment on the city for having disregarded its own well-being and peace. A judgment would likewise attend, the Lord said, on the coming again of the Son of man. That is one parallel — in each event a judgment befalls. A second parallel is apparent in the discourse; something more is true of each occurrence. The fall of Jerusalem took place at the end of an age, namely, the Old Testament era. The Lord's coming would occur at a
similar juncture, namely, the end of an age. The disciples, we note, had such a juncture in mind, wherever they placed it: "and what shall be the sign of thy coming and of the end of the world," that is, of the age? We shall have to consider how the two parallels are followed up in the Lord's discourse and first, this thought of the end of an age.

In his discourse the Lord did not use the words "end of the age," it is true. He was replying, however, to the disciples' question about the end of the age. And at his ascension some forty days later the Lord did use this language. He assured his disciples that he would be with them "always, to the close of the age." (Matthew 28:20, RSV.) In the discourse on Olivet, the Lord moreover, used equivalent words, words that picture the end of an age. They are the well-known—if too little understood—words:

But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light.

And the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken.

(Mark 13:24, 25.)

This was traditional language for depicting, not the end of the physical world, but the end of an age. Isaiah spoke in this way of the end of a political period in his times.

For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light; the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine.

(18:10.)

The prophet Joel used the same language about the end of a religious era.

The sun and the moon shall be darkened, and the stars shall withdraw their shining.

(8:15.)

At Pentecost the Apostle Peter was to quote these words of Joel's; to his mind an age expired then and a more spiri-

tual one was ushered in. Neither then nor in the other instances were the sun and the moon blacked out and the stars dark. The physical world continued as ever. Are the words not figurative language, poetical rendering of the prose "end of an age"? Very interestingly Luke mixes figure of speech and plain speech, adding to the words of Mark and Matthew; he writes,

And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring;

Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken.

(21:25, 26.)

Especially if we feel that the added words are Luke's and not the Lord's, they seem to be meant as a plainer rendering of the figurative words to which Mark and Matthew confine themselves. Conditions are depicted which spell and mark the end of an age.

At such a time, then, the Lord is placing his Return. Conditions that bring an age to an end precede his Return and indeed necessitate it. "Then" will the Son of man come. (Mark 13:26; Matthew 24:30.) The impression made is that the Lord's Return is at a considerable distance. While therefore he could say of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple that it would be soon, in the lifetime of that generation, of the day of his coming, he said,

But of that day and that hour knoweth no man; no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.

(Mark 13:32.)

It is like saying, "But, while I can give the time for what is near, that far day I cannot name; only the Father, in his infinite foresight, knows." Other sayings in the discourse also imply that the time of the Lord's Return is distant. Love would have waxed cold with many, the Lord declares.
That would be a condition calling for his Return, for does he not mean that the love with which Christianity started out would have waxed cold? Iniquity would abound, he said — it would be above the average, provoking redemption again. On one occasion the Lord associated a decline of faith with his Return — assuredly a decline of faith among his followers: “When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8.) Still another saying indicates, and perhaps more plainly, a distant day as the time of the Lord’s Return. This is the declaration: “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness to all nations; and then shall the end come.” (Matthew 24:14.) Can this be understood to have reference to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.? At that time had the Gospel been preached in even the then known world? For a world-wide evangelization we must come well down on our own times. Had the Lord’s thought moved to the subject of his Return and his listeners not followed him? Other sayings, we must judge, were misplaced because of the too close association into which the disciples brought the fall of Jerusalem and the Lord’s Return. There is the verse immediately preceding the one about the preaching of the Gospel world-wide: “but he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.” (Verse 13.) Who could these be? Certainly not those who were caught and lost in the siege of Jerusalem. This is language used of followers of the Christ, enduring to the end in their loyalty, however cold the love of many might grow, and iniquity might abound. Do we not carry away the impression that the Return, put at the end of the age, is put at a distant day?

Must not the age of which an end is predicted be the Christian age? That seems too startling to be credited, and yet it is the Christian age out over which the Lord is looking. His discourse has some difficulties inhering in it or attaching to the record of it, as we have seen; but at this point we can bring a difficulty to the discourse. Many interpreters entertain such concepts as “the end of time” and “the end of history,” which are much more sweeping concepts, but find the end of a Christian age inconceivable. Need this mean more than the end of a first Christian age? In the light of some other sayings of the Lord, does it mean more? It is odd that Christians should think that the Lord would come the second time to wind things up, as though it was all a bad experiment, and even roll up the universe, which has remained orderly. Are not “the end of time” and “the end of history” disguised ways of perpetuating a literalistic understanding of the passage about sun, moon and stars to mean the destruction of the universe; for what gives us “time” except the sun and moon and the cosmos about us? How differently the Lord spoke! Instead of saying that at his coming the end of things was near — the end of history or of time or of the world — he assured his hearers:

And when these things begin to come to pass [these things, be it noted, include the signs in sun, moon and stars, and “distress of nations” and “men’s hearts failing them”] then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.

(Luke 21:28.)

When ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand.

(Luke 21:31.)

That is, a new Christian age begins. Why should not the Lord come the second time as he came the first time, to re-inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth?* Are not his purposes constant, and constructive? The Son of man comes in order to re-establish his kingdom.

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*An interpreter of Matthew 24 who holds the concept of “the end of history” will declare that the Lord’s return will bring history to an end, and in the very next sentence declare: “This age will be succeeded by a permanent order of righteousness and peace, the kingdom of God.” But Bill, God has in the heavens of the spiritual world, and only in the world of immortal life can he have a “permanent order of righteousness and peace, the kingdom of God.” What does the Lord come again to do here?
THE RETURN OF THE CHRIST

So much — and it is startling enough — we learn about the time of the Lord's Return. It will be a day hidden in the infinite foresight, but a day marked by conditions which constitute the end of an age. This can hardly be other than a first Christian age, with promise of a second. What is there to learn about the manner of the Lord's Return?

Asked how they think the Lord will return, Christians are more likely to reply that he will come in the clouds of heaven than to give any other answer. The Lord told his four listeners on Olivet that the Son of man will come "in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." (Mark 13:26; Matthew 24:30.) Luke renders the saying, "And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." (Luke 21:27.) In Acts 1:9, describing the Lord's Ascension, Luke writes that "a cloud received him" out of his disciples' sight, and says that in like manner the Lord would come again. What can it mean that the Son of man will come in the clouds or in a cloud? Two sayings in the Lord's discourse make a common understanding of the words impossible. On the strength of the words many expect a physical reappearance of the Lord; for what other can be made in the clouds of the sky? But such a coming would inevitably be at some point in space, and the Lord declared that men could not cry at his Return, "Lo, here," or "Lo, there." Indeed, he went on to say, "For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be." (Matthew 24:27; cf. Luke 17:24.) Far from being localized, the Lord's Return is in some way to be capable of wide diffusion.

But that is only saying what the coming in the clouds cannot mean; what can it mean? The Scriptures in general provide an explanation. They regularly depict a manifestation of God with clouds attending on it; if clouds do not literally attend, they appear in a figure of speech. At the giving of the Decalogue clouds surrounded the top of Sinai and hid Jehovah from sight. Clouds are God's chariot — so he moves in the forces of nature or in the events of history, not plainly seen. Nahum called the clouds the dust of Jehovah's feet. Daniel saw a vision of the Son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. (Daniel 7:13.) The vision was of the Lord coming the first time. And was not God's presence in the Man of Nazareth obscured by much — the human nature, the physical presence, the subjection to temptation and suffering, the limitation to years and locality? Revelation speaks of the Lord's coming just as Mark and Matthew do: "Behold, he cometh with clouds." (1:7.) In a manifestation of God, along with manifestation there is a veiling of the divine presence. Is this not the large, general suggestion in the Lord's coming in the clouds? When the Son of man comes, his presence will in a measure be veiled.

We noted that the book of Acts also depicts this manner of Return. Describing the Lord's Ascension, it says that a cloud received him out of the sight of onlookers, and adds that as he was taken up, so he would come again. The Lord did not then cease to be present with men, but his presence became veiled. But is that all that the passage in Acts has to tell us of the manner of the Lord's Return? Should the reference in the words "in like manner" be confined to the cloud in the total picture? Let us turn to the passage for what more it may have to tell us. The Lord's Ascension came at his eleventh recorded appearance after his resurrection. At that appearance he spoke of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit soon to come, as it did at Pentecost ten days later. When he had finished speaking, says Luke,
The incident holds two very weighty suggestions for the picture of the Lord's Return. In the first place, on whom were the "men of Galilee" looking? Was it not upon the Risen Christ? If "this same Jesus" was to return, it would be the Lord Risen and glorified who would manifest himself. This is one significant suggestion to be derived from the picture of the Ascension for our picture of the Lord's Return. A second suggestion is already present in the first. Beholding the Risen Lord, who was not seen by all but only by those whose eyes were opened, the Galileans were beholding the Lord in the world of the spirit; by resurrection he had passed into that world, and now was ascending even above it. The two men in white apparel were so described in order to say that they were men in the world of the spirit. They did not belong to the company of the disciples, nor were they of this world, but brought enlightenment from their world. If all this has something to tell us about the way in which the Lord will return, must we not conclude that at his Return the world of the spirit will be markedly in evidence? The Lord himself spoke on Olivet of other-world activity at his coming.

They shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Matthew 24:30, 31; Mark 13:26, 27.)

These are two momentous suggestions to be gained from the description of the Ascension for our conception of the Lord's Return. The world of the spirit will come to view then in some way. The Risen and glorified Lord it is who will come.

We are seeking to bring together, out of the Lord's own words principally, an idea of what his Return will be like. We have yet to consider the constant designation of the Lord as the Son of man in connection with his Return. "Then shall appear the sign of the Son of man," "they shall see the Son of man coming," "the Son of man cometh when ye think not." Should not the emphasis on this designation check the inclination to regard the outpouring of the Holy Spirit** as the Second Coming? The gift of the Holy Spirit was an integral part of the Lord's first coming, was it not? It was one culmination of that coming. The Risen Lord breathed upon his disciples, and said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost." (John 20:22); and this did not wait until Pentecost. But what can be regarded as the force of the designation "the Son of man" for the Lord when he comes again? The Son of man, the Lord said, sows the Word. Intensive teaching filled the three years of the Lord's ministry on earth. Are we to associate explicit teaching with the Son of man as we do a general enlightenment which is wordless with the Spirit? The Lord, the Teacher,

*The Apostle Paul, writing before the Lord's discourse about his return was recorded in the Gospels, expressed not only his own thought but the thought of early Christians generally on the subject. He considered the return imminent 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17, 5:2-3). The idea had some undesirable reactions — ordinary work was abandoned by some, who became burdens on the small Christian groups. First, Paul qualified the idea, and then as the years went by with no return in sight, he no longer voiced it. Of course, it proved to be mistaken. Paul's general idea of the return was literalistic: "We that are alive shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:17). It conflicted with the Lord's saying that one could not cry "Lo, here" or "Lo there." Are not the Lord's words determining, and do they not have the precedence?

**To regard the outpouring of the Spirit as the Lord's return seems to many interpreters to spiritualize what they regard as the literalistic pictures of Matthew and Mark. The Gospel of John, which omits the discourse on the Mount of Olives, is thought to do such spiritualizing. Have we found either that discourse or the description of the Ascension at all literalistic? The Fourth Gospel also omits the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, and the Sermon on the Mount as a whole.
also said, "I have yet many things to say unto you." (John 16:12.)

We have finally to take up the second of the two parallels drawn in the Lord's discourse on Olivet between the fall of Jerusalem and his Return. As the former event took place at the end of an age, so would the Lord's Return; this parallel we have considered. As a judgment befell Jerusalem at its destruction, a judgment would attend on the Lord's Return; this parallel we now consider for a moment. A judgment and the end of an age are closely linked; a religious age can hardly be said to be ended except in a judgment on it. Throughout the Lord's discourse there are intimations that a judgment will attend on his coming. Twice the "elect" are spoken of (Matthew 24:22, 31), and the "saved" are (verse 22), also those "taken" and those "left." (Verses 40, 41.) There is the comparison with the days of Noah (verse 37), when the deluge came in judgment on mankind. In the mention of Noah, incidentally, we have an implication that a judgment closing one age breaks the way for a new age; for in Noah the Lord named, not a representative of the age gone by, but the progenitor of the age to come in those pre-historic days. The Lord's discourse on Olivet about his Return is also followed by three parables of judgment, the parables of the wise and foolish virgins, of the talents well used and unused, and of the sheep and goats. Commentators regard the chapter made up of the parables, chapter 25, as one discourse with chapter 24. In these parables, more plainly in the second than in the first, and most plainly in the third, the scene of judgment, we should note, is the world of the spirit. "And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 25:30.) "And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal." (46.) From the passage we considered in Acts we concluded that the spiritual world would be in evidence in some way at the Lord's Return; according to these parables one way in which it will appear is in connection with the judgment attending on the Return.

The predicted features or aspects of the Lord's coming which we have been able to deduce from his words and from some other Scriptures are for the most part large features and somewhat indistinct features, like, for example, the capacity of his coming to be widespread like the lightning. This is one reason, no doubt, why the Lord bade men watch (Matthew 24:42; Mark 13:33, 35, 37); a reason, too, why he bade them pray. They would need to discern what might answer to his words and need to rise into caring for his way of fulfilling their hopes. Furthermore, no more than at his first coming would he want by unmistakable prediction to force acknowledgement of him and make it automatic and matter-of-fact. The picture is left very much an outline. Did it not have to be left so? It could not be precise any more than the hour or day could be named, and for the same reason, all was in the keeping of infinite foresight. To say this in another way, only the event would define the predictions. Was this not true of the first Advent? Predictions of it led few to expect the historic Nativity scene at Bethlehem. Have we not another meaning here for the idea that the Son of man comes with clouds? As men await his coming with mistaken anticipations, and the most discerning are not clear what will happen, is the Lord not coming with clouds? The Son of man will steal on us like a thief in the night. Yet the Lord also said, "Behold, I have told you before." (Matthew 24:25.) "Watch ye therefore." (Mark 13:35.) "What I say unto you I say unto all, Watch." (Verse 37.) Had he not said enough for guidance and for prayerful alertness?
Concluding our examination of the Scripture promises, let me summarize what we have gathered from them about the Lord’s Return. We have first of all a confident “that” — that the Christ will come again. We have a startling “when” — when a first Christian era has run low in spirituality and redeeming power, in such measure as to be ending. We have assembled some ideas about “how” the Son of man will come. One manner of advent is not to be expected — a coming here or there. By implication a physical appearance is not to be expected; that would have to be here or there. Rather the coming will be made in such a way that it can extend far, traveling, the Lord said, like the lightning that shines from east to west. It would be of a kind to be described in the language traditionally used of divine manifestations, that is, a coming in the clouds — the Lord’s presence would be veiled in its nature or obscured by our dim perceptions. The Son of man it is who comes, who on earth taught so intensively. A judgment in the world of the spirit accompanies the Lord’s Return. It closes one age only to break the way for another age. From the description of the Ascension in Acts we concluded that as the Lord would come as he ascended, “this same Jesus,” the Lord Risen and glorified it would be who would manifest himself. The same Scripture, we found, lifts the world of the spirit into prominence at the Lord’s Return.

We inquire next whether any fulfilment of the hope that the Lord will return can have occurred.

II

A FULFILMENT: IN RENEWAL OF CHRISTIANITY

Are we justified in regarding anything as the Lord’s Return which does not answer to the picture he drew of it?

First of all, therefore, we examined his words for the guidance they offer. He said, “I have foretold you,” and he bade men be alert to discern his coming, as though he had given sufficient guidance. Principally we studied the long discourse which the Lord spoke on the subject to four of his disciples two or three days before the Crucifixion (Mark 13 and Matthew 24 and portions of chapters in Luke). We also examined the passage in Acts (1:9-11) describing the Lord’s Ascension, for it assures us that as he ascended, “so in like manner” he would come again. In the pages immediately preceding we summarized what we gathered from these Scriptures in the way of an anticipatory picture of the Lord’s Return. Included in this picture are indications of the manner of his Return — it will not be so unmistakable but that faith is necessary to discern it, nor can it be hailed with “Lo, here” or “Lo, there”; accordingly, it will not be a physical reappearance which must be here or there; rather will it be in a way to enable the Lord to come widely. A signal judgment will attend on his coming again. He will come as the Son of man, who came teaching. As at the Ascension the world of the spirit will in some way be in evidence. It will be the Risen and glorified Lord — “this same Jesus” who ascended — who will manifest himself. Added to these features of the manner of the Lord’s Return is a general indication of the time; the day is not fixed, but the time is characterized — Christian love will have lost its ardor, and faith declined, so much so that a first Christian age can be said to have ended. At that
Is there any occurrence or development which we can feel answers to this picture of the Lord's Return? May it be that we have his Return to hail today? The possibility is earnestly presented, to be earnestly pondered by any who cherish the hope of the Lord's Return.

We move a long way down the Christian centuries for the day about which the Lord talked with the Four on Olivet. A long way — but then we have the end of an age to which to travel! We pause a little more than midway in the eighteenth century. By that time the Christian era has achieved more than the length of the Old Testament era. We have exchanged ancient Palestine for quite modern Sweden. We are in another capital, not Jerusalem, but Stockholm. In a study in his garden, a serene man with contemplative eyes is writing one more book. For he has been writing a number of volumes, some large, some small, about God and the Bible and Christianity for more than a score of years. In these books he has been formulating the teachings of the Word in a massive restatement of the Christian Gospel. In the Word of Old Testament and New Testament he has been expounding a spiritual meaning which has to do with our experience in regeneration and with the Lord's experience in glorification of his Humanity. On the Christian hope of immortality he is sure that a further, informative light now falls. It is difficult to name a reality of the Christian faith or life which is not dealt with in the thirty volumes that have come from Emanuel Swedenborg's hands. He also has a most arresting reply to make to our question whether the Lord's prediction about coming again has had any fulfilment. For years he has been giving a confident answer in the affirmative. He says that the Lord's Second Coming is in progress. He hails it, heralds it, and says indeed that in his books he is serving it.

What does he consider it to be? Or, to take him at his word, that he heralds it, what does he find the Second Coming to be? Does it answer to the anticipatory picture which we have gathered from the Scriptures?

One of the first things that Swedenborg says about the Lord's Return is that it is not a physical reappearance. We concluded from the Lord's predictions of it that it would not be. There would be no possibility, the Lord said, of crying "Lo, here" or "Lo, there," as one certainly could of a bodily reappearance, which perforce must be at some point in space. The Lord himself comes, but not by this manner of manifestation. Was there an inadequacy in the First Advent, which was made in the flesh or by physical appearance, for another such appearance to be made? Was not everything to be accomplished by that manner of coming perfectly and forever effected? The Incarnation stands unique. Still, suppose that the Lord returned in a physical appearance, he would enter, would he not, on a ministry of his Word? Suppose again that he does this apart from a physical reappearance? At his first coming, when some questioned whether he was the promised Christ, others asked what more the Christ could do than Jesus was doing. (John 7:31.) If the Lord comes, then, the second time with light and leading, is that not what we seek and expect? This manner of Return, we shall find, instead of throwing doubt on the adequacy of his first coming, makes that coming more meaningful than ever. The Incarnation is made to mean more than ever, so is the Lord's redemption of the world, so is his life; his very Person comes to mean more. For the Lord comes the second time, says Swedenborg, in his Word; there he makes himself still better known. The Second Coming, then, Swedenborg finds, is not a physical reappearance of the Christ, and thus his
report of it complies in that respect with our anticipatory picture of it. The Lord’s Return is a coming in spirit and in truth.

We concluded from our examination of Scripture that the Son of man is who comes, who in the life on earth taught so intensively. The Lord comes the second time, says Swedenborg, with explicit teaching. This, he says, he was commissioned to convey to men. Do we mean that we find revelation in the volumes of theology, Scripture interpretation and other-world disclosure, which came from the hand of Swedenborg? All this, he said, was revelation to him. Many an idea of his was relinquished as he gathered up the teachings of the Word into a unified whole; unexpected meaning in Scripture was disclosed to him; and by a marvelous mercy and privilege, he said, the world of the spirit was let come to his consciousness, for him to tell men of it. If the age is clear that revelation there cannot be, may the Lord have spoken from a prescience that that might be the case? “When the Son of man comes, shall he find faith in the earth?” (Luke 18:8.) Shall not the Lord, when he comes again, reveal anything? Is it not expected that he will, and eagerly desired that he should? Truly he does, declared Swedenborg; coming in the Word he cannot but come in revelation. Swedenborg expounds the spiritual sense (as he calls it) of the Word of the Lord; he throws endless light on the hope of immortality which we have in the Gospels; he incisively takes to pieces traditional teachings which have done injustice to the Gospel, and he makes a commanding restatement of the Christian message. This explicit teaching is of such proportions as to be a lifetime study. It is far more than a theology and a biblical exegesis. It is many-sided revelation, so rich that theologies cannot soon assimilate it or introduce its significance into the reconstruction of Christian thought. Has

the Lord come teaching, as the Son of man did? Have we fulfilment or satisfaction of another feature of our anticipatory picture of the Lord’s Return?

In still another aspect of it, the Lord’s Return or the manner of it was likened to the lightning shining from east to west; in the manner in which it was made it would be capable of wide extension. Do we come upon any satisfaction of this prediction in the Return of the Lord which Swedenborg says he serves? What is capable of such diffusion as an idea or ideas are? Truth spoken often goes far. Printed, it is diffused far more widely and surely. We recall that the Lord said that the Gospel would be preached to all nations before he was to come. That did not take place until well down towards Swedenborg’s day, when the printed Bible went with the missionary around the globe. With his lively sense of God’s hand in history, Swedenborg regarded the printing-press as a providential means for the spread of the Gospel. Providence is relying, he says, on the same means for the spread of the truth of the Lord’s Second Coming. For his work as a revelator he had to possess unusual powers of mind. Modestly he says that a man was needed who could “receive in his understanding” the body of teaching to be revealed to him. He makes just as much of a second requirement, that it must be someone who could publish the teachings by the press. He was in position to do this, and out of his pocket paid the costs of the thirty volumes of teaching that appeared over the years. How can a body of teaching be carried around the globe and be deeply settled in mankind’s attention except, like the Bible, by products of the printing-press?

I quote a paragraph from the last book which Swedenborg saw through the press. It is the passage which speaks of his reliance on the press. It also touches on what we have
said so far about features of the Lord’s Return, that this
is made in the Word and not by physical reappearance, also
that revelation is part of it, even to disclosure of the near­
ness and nature of the spiritual world. Some of Sweden­
borg’s terms call for understanding. When he says that
the Lord cannot manifest himself in person, that is to say
he does not come by physical reappearance; the Lord him­
self does come. The “new Church” whose teachings Swedeb­
borg is to “receive in the understanding” is not another
ecclesiastical body, but the renewed Christianity which the
Lord comes to establish. This passage is one of Swedeb­
borg’s chief statements of how and why he was called to
serve the Lord at his Second Coming.

As the Lord cannot manifest Himself in person
... and yet has foretold that he was to come and to
establish a new church ... it follows that he will do
this by means of a man who is able not only to re­
ceive the doctrines of that church in his under­
standing, but also to publish them by the press.
That the Lord has appeared to me, his servant, and
sent me to this office, that he afterward opened the
eyes of my spirit and so introduced me into the
spiritual world and granted me to see heavens and
hells and to talk with angels and spirits, and this
continuously for many years now, I affirm in truth;
as also that from the first day of that call I have not
received anything whatever pertaining to the doc­
trines of that church from any angel, but from the
Lord alone, while I read the Word.
(True Christian Religion, No. 779.)

In coming in the Word and with a body of teaching, how
can the Lord be said to come in the clouds of heaven with
power and great glory? That is a principal description of
the manner of the Lord’s coming again. We noted the
more general meanings that the words can have. In any
coming of God his presence is veiled or accommodated to
human view. Was it not veiled in the Christ? Did every­
one who saw the Christ know him for what he was? Many
asked, “Is not this the Carpenter?” Others said with
assurance, “We know this man whence he is.” Flesh and
blood brought mankind the Christ, but also obscured him;
it was not flesh and blood that revealed him to Peter.
(Matthew 16:17.) The Lord also came in the thick of mis­
conceptions of the predictions about him; in that respect,
too, in clouds. It was to be much the same at his Return.
To be discerned at all, his Return would have to be dis­
cerned by faith. Again the human side raises the doubts —
can the Lord for even a part of his coming utilize a mortal?
But once on a time he was born in a mortal body in order
to come. And has not his first coming been carried to
the world in Epistles and Gospels written by servants from
among men? Beyond the meanings which we have already
given for the coming in the clouds, another meaning
emerges with fulfilment of the prediction. The Lord comes
the second time, we have said, in the Word. In deep
meanings of the Word of Old and New Testament a light
shines on rebirth in man’s experience and on the glorifi­
cation of his assumed humanity in the Lord’s experience.
That light the Scriptures hide like clouds. Bringing us
that light the Lord comes in the clouds — and in the clouds
of heaven — with power and great glory. Anyone who
reads at all comprehendingly Swedenborg’s expositions of
the spiritual and celestial senses of the Word — his
Arcana Coelestia or his Apocalypse Revealed — gains at
least a hint of the power and glory with which the Lord
will come when the Christian mind rises into that light.

In the internal sense of Scripture, there is a light
comparatively like the sunlight above the clouds.
We read in the Word, therefore, that Jehovah is
borne on the clouds, rides on them, flies on them,
that he has his chamber on them, and that he will
come in the clouds of heaven.
(Arcana Coelestia, No. 8781.)

This prediction about how the Lord will come takes on new
and definite meaning in the fulfilment of it.
Is Swedenborg prepared to say that in his day a first Christian age has ended? The Lord was to come at such a juncture. This prediction, too, Swedenborg says, has come true in his day.

The Lord will reveal himself in the sense of the letter of the Word, and will open its spiritual sense, at the end of the church.

(Apocalypse Revealed, No. 24.)

The idea that a first Christian age could come to an end was not such a startling idea to Swedenborg. In his reading of mankind's religious history he discovered a series of religious eras. Two pre-historic ages, he found, were symbolically portrayed in the stories of Adam and Noah. The Lord in the discourse on Olivet said that what would befall the age over which he looked forward would be like what befell in the days of Noah. We all know of the end of the Old Testament age and the beginning of the New Testament age. The traditional language in which the Lord described the conditions that constituted the end of the first Christian age, also acquired a most precise meaning for Swedenborg. Blacked out sun and moon and fallen stars did not remain just a general figurative language meaning the end of an era. They did mean the end of an era, he said, not the destruction of the universe. That understanding of the words, common in his day, came of not appreciating oriental figure of speech, but, added Swedenborg, also for lack of knowing the deeper sense of Scripture. He found a precise correspondence between the natural phenomena of darkened sun, unlighted moon and fallen stars, and the dark spiritual conditions which prevailed in Christendom — the fire of such outgoing love as Christ inspires was failing, faith that reflects this ardor was faint, heavenly insights had deteriorated into unseeing credal formulations, and the influence of heaven or the force of religious purpose on earth was feeble, indeed.

Nature was not going to suffer a cataclysm; rather, naturalism was blacking out the spiritual life. Once more fulfilment brought more meaning to prediction.

How can Swedenborg be so confident that conditions had arisen bringing a first Christian age to a close? On what can he base his assertion? To earnest souls at that time the Christian Church was a professional ecclesiasticism and sadly bereft of spiritual life. Thousands left the Continent and England for America seeking something freer, more vital, holier and more human. In England Methodism was arising in protest. Historians tell of the irreligion, scepticism and hollowness of Christian profession. More than one man, looking back, has called that period the midnight of the Christian Church. At the time Swedenborg called it night, the same night, he said, in which previous religious ages had expired. But his conviction did not rest on history — history of that time was yet to be written. And does history ever reveal how far humanity may be departing from the life eternal? Even now no history uncovers the conditions that moved the Christ to come the first time, or hints at the woeful state of mankind which he discerned. What history can make good the words, "Ye are of your father the devil," or "I saw Satan fall as lightning from heaven"? Only a holy Presence brings into sight the unholy and perverted. Nor did Swedenborg rest his conviction on observation of Christendom around him. Then, on what does he base the declaration that the end of a first Christian era has come? It will be granted — will it not be insisted? — that to say love and faith and insight have been extinguished to such an extent that an age is ended is a judgment only God can render. In the picture of the Lord's Return a judgment attends on his coming. Swedenborg reports one taking place. If he is to serve and describe the Lord's Return in anything like its full
extent, he must be enabled in his other-world experience to witness the judgment attending on it. He declares he did. We shall have much more to say of this in our next chapter. Now we point out that the judgment attending on the Lord's Return made it evident to Swedenborg that a first Christian age had run its course and discovered to him the inward condition of Christendom at his day. Accordingly, one more prediction — that a judgment will attend on the Lord's Return — is fulfilled in the Second Coming as Swedenborg describes it.

From the passage in Acts describing the Ascension we concluded that as at the Ascension, so at the Lord's Return the world of the spirit would be in evidence. It is in evidence in the judgment of which we have just spoken; the spiritual world is the scene of any judgment and of a judgment on a religious era. For this must fall upon persons who have lived during that era and are now in the world of spirit. The other world came into evidence for Swedenborg in the first place in his being enabled to see and hear in it, as he did for nearly thirty years. He was granted the experience for a mission, and the range of it was commensurate with what he was called upon to do. He was to make known new depths of God's Word and to give in words of our language an idea of how the Word is understood in heaven. He was to note the intimate residence of the spiritual world in the natural world, and the relationships of the two, something here corresponding always to something there. Those correspondences also exist between the Scriptures and the grasp which men and women in the heavens have of the Word. And, of course, the servant of the Lord was to tell of that world, as he does "from things heard and seen," and thus inform the Christian hope of immortality. In still other ways the world of the spirit comes in evidence, as prediction indicated it would at the Lord's Return.

Consider how knowledge of that world could at once deepen and elevate any Christian doctrine! Each of the chief doctrines of Christianity is formulated by Swedenborg in the light of his knowledge of the world of the spirit. The concept of that world is an organ of thought with him. Is it not obvious that far more can be said about Providence if something is known of the other world? The goals of history and of human existence to which Providence leads, are to be found there; unseen channels of God's providence and grace must exist there. How very much more Swedenborg was enabled to say about the Incarnation! God, transcending the finite spiritual world, must for Incarnation have traversed that world, as he "bowed the heavens." Catching sight of the realm of the spirit and its residence and constant activity in the physical universe, Swedenborg could also erect a philosophy of a spiritual-natural or psycho-physical universe, in the very constitution of which religion has a secure function and is altogether at home. In so many ways the world of the spirit is prominent in the Second Coming hailed and served by Swedenborg. The description of the Lord's Ascension in Acts encouraged us to think it would be. If the world of the spirit has reality for us at the Ascension, should it not now in our concept of the Lord's Return?

We have to consider, finally, the second inference which we drew from the passage in Acts about the Ascension. If, as that Scripture says, "this same Jesus" returns whom the disciples saw ascend, then it is the Risen and glorified Lord who manifests himself on his Return. That manifestation is to the mind, of course, and not to the bodily eye — at the Ascension it was not to the bodily eye. Once a few men heard and saw with their eyes, looked upon and touched the Word of life. (1 John 1:1.) The more surely in the memory of that experience the Risen Lord is God
visible to thought, and in him is God beyond our thought or invisible. The humanity which enabled “that which was from the beginning” to come under the eyes and be heard by the ear and be handled by human touch — this humanity, assumed from Mary, God incarnate made all his own; it was reborn as well as begotten of the Infinite, and was glorified with God’s own self. (John 17:5.) In this Divine Humanity God manifests himself at his Return and is near to us. Of the total Deity Swedenborg speaks as the Lord God the Saviour Jesus Christ, in whom is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A Scripture often quoted by him is:

For in him [namely, Christ] dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. (Colossians 2:9.)

The depth of infinite Being known only to himself is the Father; the Divine Humanity in which he is known to men is the Son; the life he has to impart is the Holy Spirit. In one Person, in whom unity and trinity dwell, the Lord manifests himself at his Return. Is Swedenborg assembling doctrine from the Word? In all the doctrine it is the Risen and glorified Lord who is spoken of as God — God who made us, guides us, bids us be about his purposes, hears our prayers, forgives us. Is Swedenborg telling about the world of the spirit? God in his Divine Humanity is the God of heaven. He is the Center of heaven’s life, the Source of goodness and truth. His burning and inexhaustible love for mankind is the blazing Sun in heaven. Or is the servant of the Lord laying open a deep meaning in Scripture? One Divine Figure moves throughout Scripture in that profound meaning — One who could say, “Before Abraham was, I am.” We encounter only God as we can know him in the Risen and glorified Christ. In the very deepest sense of the Word we follow the inner life of the Christ on earth and learn the way in which, having come from God, he in the glorification of his humanity went to God. The manifestation of the Lord to us, in doctrinal concept, in biblical insight, in heaven’s knowledge of him, is manifestation to the mind and heart of his creatures. It can be endlessly revealing. It is acquaintance going far beyond eye and ear and touch. In being this manner of Return — a revelation of the Lord in his abiding Presence — it earns the best of the Scripture names for it: Parousia.

Whether it is what Swedenborg can only herald, like the judgment, which is divine action, or what he actually gives us, which he sets down in his books, has it to do with anything but Christianity? Is it not all for the renewal of Christianity? The end of the age is to the servant of the Lord not the end of time, or of the world, or of history, but the end of an age, to be followed by another. The kingdom of the Christ is to be reinaugurated. New heavens and new earth, as the Book of Revelation says, are to come. “Behold, I make all things new.” In the next chapter of this leaflet we shall note some of the hopeful consequences of the judgment attending on the Lord’s Return, especially some results in the temper and tone of Christianity. For the remainder of this chapter we consider how the explicit teaching given in revelation through Swedenborg makes for the renewal of Christianity, especially some results which have come for Christian thought.

When the Christ came the first time, he not only carried Old Testament insights to greater heights; he sought to correct mistaken ideas and traditions that made the Word of God of none effect. Shall we not expect the Lord in returning to find that many a traditional and even honored teaching is, however, a departure from his mind and from his spirit? Part of his servant’s commission may well be to recall us from errors. Swedenborg criticizes a number of teachings prevalent in the church at his day. Some of
these he assails with something more than vigor, with vehemence. Among those which he attacks the most sternly is an idea of the Trinity in God which amounts to having three Divine Beings. That idea has led to other impossible ideas — that one Divine Being pays to another the penalty mankind owes; that God did not come into the world, but another Being did; and is not the path and object of prayer confused? The idea of God, “rent asunder,” says Swedenborg, has let the discouraged mind drop back into naturalism. He assails other ideas. The idea that God predestines some to heaven, some to an infernal region, exalted one truth, the sovereignty of God, but forgot about his justice and his love. Swedenborg was appalled at the kind of God folks must have in mind who think that a baby who dies unbaptized on that account enters something short of a full heaven; could this be the God we know in Christ? He was appalled, too, to think what kind of God folks have in mind who think that salvation is confined to Christians. The idea that Christ’s merits could be imputed to a person, saving him, and the idea of an instantaneous salvation, he denounced as magical and unreal, deterring persons from seeking the slow regeneration that could be their salvation. Swedenborg dealt heavy blows at what he called faith alone or the idea that belief, the stoutest belief in the truth, too, was saving — he was sure one has to try to live up to that truth. Of course, in the light of his spiritual-world experience, he found many impossible ideas of the other life current. One of these was our supposed bodily resurrection. Another was the idea that on death a prolonged sleep follows until a last trump. The body is left, he reports, and never resumed; and consciousness of the world of the spirit comes soon after the body has ceased to function. In the heavens he found regenerating men and women — no other angels; and in the hells he found men and women who are clinging to their perverted lives — no other devils.

If Christianity was to be renewed, Swedenborg was clear that many an inveterate idea must go. It should go, if it did the Gospel injustice.

Noticeable reconstruction of Christian thought has come since Swedenborg’s day. He was confident that reconstruction would come, just as he was sure that teachings which did the Gospel injustice must go. A spirit of inquiry would arise, he said, recasting Christian thought. Many earnest Christians today have never heard of the traditions which Swedenborg assailed so earnestly. Most of the teachings that he criticized have come under general criticism since. Thinking has sought to rid the truth of the Trinity from the bedevilment of tritheism. Religious inquiry, with the help of psychology, has supplanted instantaneous salvation with the realization that regeneration is one’s gradual growth into a Christian character. As for faith as the one reliance for salvation, how strong the note is in Christianity today which Swedenborg sounded many decades ago — one must seek to realize the spiritual or Christian life with all one’s powers of heart and mind. The good sense that the world of the spirit is peopled by human beings, men and women who have lived on earth, has been spreading. So has the good sense that a person comes to consciousness in the immortal world soon after death, and that the physical body is all that dies, is left behind, and of course is never resumed.* Swedenborg had his vision of Christian unity — to him a profound reality, meaning more than existing in a single organization, which is undesirable, and more than doctrinal agreement, which is unnecessary. All who are actuated by love to the Lord and charity to the neighbor are one body in the Lord’s sight. Christian unity

* Perhaps the changed or changing thinking is most apparent on the subject of the life hereafter. Many of the changes mentioned above in thought of the life after death are voiced in After Death, by Leslie D. Weatherhead, a book popular since 1914 in England and America. And that a changed thinking has come is testified to by the subtitle of the book: “A Popular Statement of the Modern Christian View of Life Beyond the Grave.”
has come to pre-occupy thought and effort. A Christianity of a 'different' mind has been struggling into existence.

Where Christianity is seeing renewal, and the Christian mind is gaining new insights, whose work is it? Is it the intention and result of human wit? Is it his activity and his enlightenment of the minds of his servants, who said, "Behold, I make all things new"? Leaders in the movement toward Christian unity declare that the Christ inspires them to that movement. Swedenborg would have us recognize this truth generally. The Lord is dealing with his following now in his Second Coming, in judgment, in a grant of light, in inspiration to a new day. In the explicit restatement of the Christian message in his books Swedenborg is offering an intellectual means from his Master for the renewal and redirection of Christian thought. More than that, he is putting into firm and steadying statement the truths that will make their way — by his books or otherwise — into Christian thought, refashioning it. He sees those truths faring forth into the Christian mind — they and not he will do the refashioning of it. They are truths on which Christianity depends for renewal. To progress vitally and with redeeming power, must not Christianity make more of the Christ and see God more clearly in him? Must not Christianity get more from the Bible, not only find the Word of God in it, as it has hitherto, but a profounder meaning in it, speaking directly and everywhere to spiritual need and experience? Necessary, too, is it that Christianity shall make far more of the world of the spirit. How will you stem materialism and absorption in this world unless a world of the spirit is real and consequential enough to pit against an engrossing material world? When the Lord comes again, do we not expect just these things of him? More word of the world where he prepares a place for us? A deepening of the understanding of his Word? Fuller, more intimate revelation of himself?

III

A FULFILMENT: IN A WORLD REDEMPTION

We have been discussing the Lord's Return as though it is in progress. At the beginning of this leaflet the conviction was expressed that his Return is a present reality — that he is dealing now in his Second Coming with his following, in judgment, in inspiration to fresh Christian experience, and in the granting of light on that experience. In the preceding chapter we tried to show that the light is shining to some effect. Yet the question may be asked why all this, if it is true, is not more evident. The Lord, in his predictions of his Return, represented it as something which must be discerned, and discerned by faith, and bade us watch. Think back, moreover, to his first coming — how little known that was at the time! The great world knew very little of Palestine, an obscure corner of the vast Roman Empire, and a country that had habitually kept to itself and to its peculiar ways. The Man of Nazareth was as little known as was his native land. Indeed, only in the three years of his ministry had he become known in Palestine among his own people. His ministry went by, his Crucifixion did, his Resurrection did, a good part of the people still unaware of the day of divine visitation. A poem by Dorothy Parker brings out the fact poignantly. A woman who had been a maid-servant at the inn in Bethlehem recalls Mary and the Child, the cold night and the dreary barn, and at the very time of the Crucifixion is praying that all may be well with Mary and her Son! Not all in Palestine, and what a tiny handful in all the world, knew of the Lord's first coming at the time! Only as mankind looked back did they appreciate in swelling numbers and nation after nation that the Incarnation of God had occurred — the most momentous event in the planet's history. Why should not the course of things be much the
same on the Lord’s Return? Any light and leading which he offers, such as have been described, must become more pronounced in its effects; effects must be more widely felt from any judgment which accompanies his Return.*

We can give thanks that the Lord’s Return is so gentle and inconspicuous, and hope that it will not be turned spectacular by a world catastrophe. The Lord came into the world to set men free from hatred, from the desire to kill, and from resort to force. The opposition to him grew violent, however, and culminated in the Cross. If he comes today in the freedoms of human life — and how can he do otherwise? — tyrannies which are antagonized may be provoked to launch the dreadful war of an atomic age. In Luke’s account of the Lord’s discourse on Olivet the time of the Return is described in these words: there will be distress of nations, with perplexity, and men’s hearts will be failing them for fear, and for looking after the things which are coming on the earth. (21: 25, 26.) Fortunately, that is not all that is to be said of our times, but for part of what is to be said, can we find more expressive words? I shall dwell on the more auspicious world climate to result from the Return of the Lord, but the dire possibilities which weigh mankind down should not go unmentioned, and they will be mentioned again. But now, in addition to recalling the inconspicuousness of the Lord’s First Coming for an answer to the question why the Second Coming, if it is being made, is not a palpable fact, let us hope and pray that it will not entail catastrophe — and a Cross for mankind — in order to be better known.

We consider in this chapter the judgment which, according to prediction, was to attend on the Lord’s Return. We have said that a judgment does attend on the Lord’s Second

*He would come again; and one may surely believe that, were there a true spiritual revival, a ‘rebirth of Christianity,’ subsequent ages would look back and interpret it as a ‘Second Coming’ after all.” An Introduction to the Bible. Stanley Cook, p. 299.
Gospels make it plain that the Lord at his First Coming
accomplished something of world dimensions — re-consti-
tuted the world in the sense that he gave mankind a more
auspicious unseen moral and spiritual environment. And
this he did by means of a judgment in the world of the
spirit.

In the judgment attending on the Lord’s Second Coming,
a similar reordering of the world of the spirit took place,
says Swedenborg. As he describes it, heavens were re-
ordered, hells were subdued, and an advancing spiritual life
was sped earthward. We know that a greater good — like
international good-will — has emerged on our vision, and
that some inveterate evils seem a little less formidable. As
we have noted, Swedenborg declares that in his other-world
experience he witnessed the judgment that effected this
world-re-constitution. We noted that it was the judgment
which assured him that a first Christian era had come to
its close. From that judgment he learned, also, what the
redemption at the Lord’s First Coming was like; it has
the same pattern. None of this other-world experience of
his was curious or vacant; it was in awful earnest. From
day to day he noted in his diaries what he was observing.
These notes he assembled finally in volumes entitled The
Last Judgment and Continuation Concerning the Last Judg-
ment. He reports in detail, for like John of Patmos in
vision he also hears the command, “Write.” In those two
slight volumes, however, he says that he cannot reproduce
very much of the story of the last judgment. He presents
much more in two large volumes explaining the Book of
Revelation, and entitled Apocalypse Revealed. Why should
he tell of the judgment in his exposition of the Book of
Revelation? He finds that the story of the judgment is told
in the deeper meaning of that book in greater detail than
he can tell it. May I stop on this point a moment?

You will recall that the Lord said that the day and hour
of his Return was known only to Infinite foresight. The
conditions that would necessitate the Lord’s Return must
likewise have been hidden in God’s knowledge. So must
the stages of the long decline down to those conditions
have been known to Infinite foresight. But what is hidden
in Infinite foresight can also be hidden in God’s Word. So
Swedenborg found, and said that the deeper meaning of
Scripture could be disclosed now that the judgment had
taken place. (Apocalypse Revealed, No. 312.) In the spiritual
sense of the chapters about the Lord’s Return (Matthew
24 and Mark 13), in which the Lord looks out over the age
to its close, the stages of the decline of the first Christian
era are described. And in the spiritual historical sense of
The Book of Revelation (that book has also to do with the
Lord’s coming) Swedenborg found the conditions at the
close of the period depicted and the judgment on them pow-
erfully narrated. The story was already done! The Word
witnesses to what he said he witnessed.

What did he see and report? What can be said in the
space of this chapter must be highly fragmentary. As we
noted, he felt that he was selective to a degree in the two
slight volumes we named. We shall have to be much more
so, although now, as judgment and a world-redemption
become the subject, the magnitude of the Lord’s Return
comes into sight.

While the judgment fell on an era, it did not fall on all
who had lived during that era. Countless lives had met
judgment on entering the spiritual world. Right along men
and women had been gathered to their spiritual kindred
either in heavenly societies or in infernal communities.
The openly good found their places in heaven, and the
frankly and outright evil theirs in hell. In the penetrating
light of the spiritual world one’s actual character is soon
made clear in most of us. But obscurantists or pseudo-
Christians had organized what Swedenborg calls false
heavens. The hypocrisies of these leaders were not appar-
ent to all, and many good-hearted but undiscriminating men
and women were misled. Together they formed these seem-
ing heavens. A fanatical fervor and a crowd psychology
made a compact and unreasoning mass of these human
beings. At the Lord’s First Coming, it will be recalled,
his most severe condemnations fell upon “hypocrites” who
played a false part, on those to whom religion was a
profitable pursuit, bringing them the slight or the marked
eminence and the adulation which they craved. They did
not enter the kingdom of heaven, the Lord said, nor did
they permit others to enter. On this same hollow and
nominal religiousness of the professional ecclesiastic the
judgment fell heavily, unmasking the real interest; on the
other hand it rescued from being duped a multitude of
well-disposed men and women who in their hearty simplicity
had been misled. Has there been no nominal Christianity
in the course of the Christian era? No shrewd manipula-
tion of simple, honest interest? No hypocrisy, rascality,
corruption over the years in Christendom? This pseudo-
Christianity maintained itself in false heavens in the other
world. On these heavens judgment fell, puncturing pre-
tense, and freeing for true Christian experience those who
had been misled, and whose spiritual lot had been delayed,
like that of the souls under the altar.

What the judgment effected can be told in another way,
or there is more it effected. In the beginnings of Chris-
tianity, the small companies of followers of the Christ were
obscure and struggling groups. There were no high offices
or stations to be aspired to. Lowliness went with loyalty:
But when Christianity became the religion of the Roman
Empire, strong organization quite rightly became the order
of the day. And while Christianity in converting nations
to itself conquered the world, as historians will tell us,
the world also entered into Christianity. The pattern of
imperial organization provided eminence and offered power.
The lust of dominion which was primitive Christianity’s
outward foe in the Roman Empire crept into the Christian
Church to become an enemy in its household in the love of
eminence, in readiness and desire to rule men’s minds and
souls, and in the search for temporal power. The judgment
fell on all these motives and desires, as any judgment of
the Lord’s would, as he came again.

Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise
dominion over them, and they that are great exercise
authority upon them.

But it shall not be so among you.
(Matthew 20: 25, 26.)

In the other world, those who persisted in their lust for
power found themselves unmasked. This, in the account
of the Book of Revelation, was Babylon falling. Again
there were those who had been the victims, this time of
false claims of power and authority, who cried in relief and
praise, “Babylon is fallen, is fallen!”

Besides the lust for prestige and power another corrupt-
ing worldliness made its way into the Christian Church, or
grew to proportions as the Church did. The institutions
of Christendom developed vested interests, and did not
these have to be safeguarded? Should not political and
other worldly power be worked with? Unwillingness to
antagonize the world grew. Let the Church identify itself
with the status quo and stand, for instance, for the divine
right of kings, or for the divinely meant authority of the
state. The world has its domain; let the civic and com-
mercial and political realms alone. It is enough to profess
the Christian faith. The city of God can be established in
the Church. The enticements and compromises which the early Christians in Ephesus and Smyrna and the other cities of Revelation fought in a pagan priesthood which served the state and maintained the worship of the Emperor, were to be found in the Christian fold. This enemy, once external to it, had also become a foe in its household. The concept of a solitary faith saving a person was the false prophet or dragon that in the judgment described in the Book of Revelation was cast into the abyss.

Hypocrisy, greed for power, and misunderstanding of the Gospel robbing it of redeeming might, exist only in human beings, and to say that the judgment fell on motives and ideas would leave it an abstract process. It fell, of course, on those who embodied the false aims and the degenerate desires and found their life and delight in them. Their rebellious hatred and squirming evasion on being revealed for what they were, and the joyful relief of the misled and victimized, are in Swedenborg's chronicle, too. Detail is amazing and lifelike. His account keeps echoing the judgments in the dark chapters of the Book of Revelation. Those seeking refuge from the judgment or trying to shield themselves from its revealing light, says Revelation, pray that the rocks may fall on them and cover them. Others who are released to a full life of their own sing new songs that only the redeemed know how to sing. Swedenborg's narrative also recalls the Lord's words in one of the parables of judgment which follow in Matthew the discourse about his Return. These are his words about the great assize when the nations are gathered before the Son of man. (25:32.) In the Assembly of the United Nations today you see placards telling you here are the representatives of the United Kingdom, here those of the United States, here those of France, or Brazil, or China, or the Soviet Republics, and of so many other peoples on this globe. Swedenborg draws a similar picture as he describes the great assize of the judgment.

According to prediction a judgment was to attend on the the Lord's Return, and would occur in the world of spirit. The Second Coming of the Lord which Swedenborg was convinced was in progress and which he hailed, heralded and helped to serve, had an epochal judgment attending on it. In the consciousness of the spiritual world that was granted him he was able to witness the judgment. The thought of it is naturally staggering to us. The reality of it all overwhelmed the servant of the Lord (so Swedenborg subscribed himself on the title page of his last publication, True Christian Religion). To his last day in this world he solemnly asserted the reality of his call and of his experience. He did not come empty-handed to his fellow men, proclaiming the Lord's Return. There is a depth of meaning in the Scriptures, he declared, in which the Lord comes with power and great glory in the clouds of heaven. This he did not leave with the assertion; in stout volume after volume he conveyed to us some of that meaning. Nor is his spiritual world-experience left with an assertion that he had it; a solid and inspiring and human disclosure of the nature and life of that world is offered us — the message is evidence of the reality of the way by which it was gained.
And now Swedenborg does not say simply that a judgment accompanies the Lord's Return. In his amazing experience he found that one did and with the help of the Scriptures — what else is described in the dark chapters of Revelation? — he depicts it as best he can to our consciousness here.

The judgment was the means to that re-constitution of the world of which we spoke. That re-constitution consisted in the provision of a more auspicious unseen moral and spiritual environment for the ongoing of the spiritual life of mankind. The spiritual world as well as this world has its history. Old heavens can pass, and new be formed. So the Book of Revelation speaks. And so, as we said, Swedenborg describes the world redemption. The life of the heavens themselves is freshly marshalled and invigorated; or, as he says, the heavens are reordered. This can be only because a further victory has been won over evil; so, he says, the hells of perverse and perverted human life are further restrained. From this forward movement in the spiritual world stimulation to spiritual advance on earth flows down. There are not only new heavens, but a new earth comes to be, that is, the spiritual life is renewed on earth. With glowing pictures of such a triumph of the Lord the Book of Revelation precedes and follows its dark chapters on the judgment. The Book begins with a vision of the Risen and abiding Christ appearing to his following. Next his Spirit appeals to all groups of his followers to enter upon a renewed life with him. And after the awesome chapters of judgment great, happy changes in the world above break on the view; in a Holy City the descent of a new light and life to earth is promised; and God's people have reason to cry, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." Is not the Return of the Christ which Swedenborg says he hails and serves just such a two-world development as the Book of Revelation makes it out to be?

The cosmic dimensions of the Lord's coming emerge, I think, on our sight. As his coming progresses, those convinced and apprised of it will be studying for signs of it. They may find signs abroad in other faiths of the world than Christianity. In the judgment, as the Seer pictured it, not only Christians were included, but also Mohammedans, and "farther out and around were gentiles in vast numbers." Islam and Hinduism and other world faiths are feeling a stir of new life. They are altering their outlook on the world, and attempting fresh and more relevant expression of themselves. We cannot go so far afield but inquire only: are there notices in Christendom of such a re-constitution of our unseen moral and spiritual environment as we have considered part of the Lord's Return?

Would not a moral and spiritual environment more auspicious for mankind's spiritual life show itself especially in the tone of Christianity? In the preceding chapter we spoke of some of the changes in Christian thinking which have come. But have not the temper and tone of Christianity changed from a hundred or more years ago? It may be debated whether or not the motivations on which judgment fell — craving for power, for example, and readiness to compromise with the world — it may be debated whether these motives common to human nature have been lessened. But are they not viewed more sternly as un-Christian, and condemned, and in a growing self-criticism on the part of the Church, thought of with shame and in penitence? Earnest heart-searching and penitence (about much besides this) is a new tone in organized Christianity. Sectarianism never troubled us so deeply as it has been doing for some years. What a determination has sprung up, despite all manner of diversities in language, culture and religious tradition, to achieve in some manner of conscious recognition the unity God's people have in his sight
THE RETURN OF THE CHRIST

— or should have in answer to the Christ's prayer "that they all may be one"!

Among earthly results for the better from the judgment on high we surely can count the spread of collective care for the unfortunate and every form of humanitarianism. One of the parables of judgment stressed this spirit — "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." The judgment has speeded this spirit. Insistence grows, also, that Christian standard and purpose shall be introduced into everyday affairs and not isolated from them. In a recent address to several hundred Italian book publishers, Pope Pius XII implored the press not to let self-interest or cowardice cause them to conceal the truth. The insistence that the Christian life be pursued in all our interests and activities is a characteristic note in current Protestantism. How long traditional Christianity sang of the Holy City New Jerusalem as a future and supernatural paradise! A modern hymn expresses the different outlook that has come.

Give us, 0 God, the strength to build
The city that hath stood
Too long a dream, whose laws are love,
Whose ways are brotherhood,
And where the sun that shineth is
God's grace for human good.

Already in the mind of God
That city riseth fair:
Lo, how its splendor challenges
The souls that greatly dare—
Yea, hide us steel the whole of life
And build its glory there.

—Walter Russell Bowie.

There is much else to show the changed tone and invigorated aims of contemporary Christianity. Struggling into existence is a Christianity bent upon genuineness and upon a transforming impact on civilization.

The Lord's Second Coming, whether it is represented in the judgment and world redemption which Swedenborg could do no more than report, or by the teachings he served to transmit, is plainly no intervention by the Lord, not in the sense that he takes everything into his hands. The truth is not abrogated, "The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord's: but the earth hath he given to the children of men." (Psalm 115:16.)

The immemorial choice still confronts us. "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live." (Deuteronomy 30:19.)

That the choice is the dire choice it is in these days of a terrible weapon does not mean that it is lifted from our souls. True peace will be made in the consciences of men. The Lord as ever has come with leadership and light; having that, we have our part to do. Has not the leave-it-to-God attitude long been abandoned by thoughtful Christianity?

Knowledge we ask not — knowledge thou hast lent —
But Lord, the will — there lies our bitter need;
Give us to build above the deep intent
The deed, the deed.

—John Drinkwater.

Mr. David Lawrence preferred to stress the same point when, on the heels of the World Council meetings in Evanston where the theme was "Christ, the hope of the world," he wrote:

Yes, this is an age of materialism. And when we transform it into an age of reborn morality, in which the courage of a God-given spirit shall guide us as it did our forefathers, then we will discover anew that the hope of the world is really to be found dormant within our own bosoms — within ourselves.


But, as we do our part, and results come which make for the renewal of Christianity and more widely for the renewal of the spiritual life of mankind, shall we ascribe this to
ourselves? If a truer Christianity arises, or is even now appearing, is it our doing, or is it his who is the Author of Christianity in the first place? Who and what has awakened our dormant hope? Can we credit inspiration from beyond ourselves? Can we have faith that when the Lord Returns, he will do so with more light? Even with objective teaching? Or will intellectual ambition, a man’s investment in his own ideas, or theological pride bar the thought of revelation? The problem of the Lord’s Return is not only a problem with his discourse about it and with the interpretation of the discourse; nor is it further only a problem with Swedenborg and his astounding experience and assertions and his work. There is the question which arises as a more genuine and a more profound Christianity takes form: is it to be credited to human initiative? Whose doing is it? Does it just come about by an increase of earnestness among the Lord’s followers? What has inspired the increase of earnestness? What if there are revolutionary religious developments outside the Christian pale? May they be the Lord’s Return or the result of it? Swedenborg had to forsake lofty intellectual ambitions, risk ridicule and loss of standing for a task he had never foreseen. As the kingdom of heaven is renewed, will the words not be valid still which the Lord spoke of it long ago? Unless one becomes as a little child one will not even see, let alone enter, the kingdom.

I have been presenting the Lord’s Return as a present reality. The only way of putting in the past the Return of the Lord which has been described is by making it far less than it is. If the publication of the teachings which Swedenborg serves to give us is considered the whole of the Lord’s Return, of course it is in the past. Yet publication has continued and will do so indefinitely — convinced followers of the Lord in his Second Coming have seen to that and created well endowed publishing societies. And what about appreciation of the significance of those teachings, or the understanding of them? That is for the present, and extends into the endless future. Sometimes the Lord’s Second Coming is identified with the disclosure of a spiritual sense in Scripture, and that disclosure, we say, was made some time ago. But the finding of that sense in Scripture and not only in Swedenborg’s statements of it has hardly begun; the rising of the Christian mind into that significance of Scripture is a promise of the future. Again, we may be tempted to consider the Lord’s Return in another aspect of it, namely, the judgment attending on it, as over and concluded, saying it was completed in some year of our calendar, and thus think to place it in the past. But have we not seen that judgment progressing on earth in Christendom to the alteration of Christendom’s thought and tone? That re-constitution of the world by which is meant a more impelling unseen environment is a continuing force, and neither can this feature of the Lord’s Return be set back in the past. Above all, once the Risen and glorified Lord manifests himself to mind and heart, can the manifestation ever cease? Must he not increase, and his servant decrease? Must he not gather more and more loyalties, in his redeeming love catch men to him, by his redeeming might bring us a new earth? The Divine self-revelation, the breaking of more light from God’s Word, the judgment closing one day and starting another, all are enduring reality. The only way to put the Lord’s Return — such as we have described it and such a Return as Swedenborg served and heralded — in the past, is to make it very, very much less than it is. It is a present and powerful reality.

Spirit of life, in this new dawn,
Give us the faith that follows on.

—E. Marlatt.