

Nicene Orthodoxy and the Return of Christ

Reworked from a sermon preached on the Apostle's Creed in November 2019

Background

The Nicene Creed has its roots in a variant of the much earlier Apostles Creed. The Roman Emperor Constantine called together a large number of Bishops to settle disputes Church in 325AD. As a result they produced a more developed Creed but this too was developed as issues rumbled on until the Council of Caledon in 451 when the creed as we have it today was formalised.

It thus represents the widespread view of believers by that time and to represent the mainstream view of Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.

The Return of Christ

With regards to the Return of Christ (His "second coming") the Apostle's Creed said that Christ is now at the right hand of the Father, **and He will come to judge the living and the dead**

There two extra words in the Nicene Creed:

... *He will come again in glory to judge...*

The New Testament mentions the return of Christ a great deal, also about what that should mean now, whilst we wait for His return. We are told in many and various ways to be ready for His coming, and all the more so because we do not know the day or the hour when it will happen.

People are often fascinated by the future, and the signs of the times. Books have been written, movements begun, churches divided, conflicts have arisen. Yet often people seem to miss this thing what the Bible stresses so much: Jesus said

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.
(Mtt 24:44)

In 2 Peter chapter 3 verses 10 we read:

The day of the Lord will come like a thief...

and then in verse 11

what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting and hastening the coming of the day of God

and in verse 14

Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.

Therefore, interesting though this subject may be, our main concern must be about living lives of holiness and godliness, as we make sure we are ready for that day.

It will become clear

The Old Testament told people things that would happen when Christ came. But when He came many did not expect what happened. Indeed, it was only after the event, and after Jesus had explained it all, that His disciples understood.

We can have our cherished ideas about the future, but the past should teach us to be humble.

In 1988 Edgar Wisenand said Christ would return in 1998.

In 1992 Harold Camping said Christ would return in 1994.

Both sold many copies of their books. Both were wrong – they were deceivers.

Christian history is littered with those who boldly predicted the return of Christ, many started great movements, many sold lots of books, some caused chaos, and they were wrong. There was a particular upsurge in such things in the run up to AD1,000 and in the run up to AD2,000.

We need some humility and in these notes I will stick to the basics.

The basics

The Nicene Creed is brief:

He shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead

The official doctrine of our Church of England is the 39 Articles of Religion. Article 4, which is about the ascension and return of Christ is taken word for word from the 1530 Augsburg Confession. That was the earliest Protestant statement of faith but on this point Catholics and Orthodox would also agree.

*He ascended into Heaven, and there sitteth
until he return to judge all Men at the last day.*

Christ is now with the Father, reigning in glory. He will be there until He returns to judge at the last day. These things leaves no gap between His present reign and His return, or between His return and the final judgment.

Two ages

In the Bible we find that it speaks about two ages, the present age, and the age to come. For example in Matthew 12 verse 32 Jesus spoke about people being forgiven or not forgiven: *either in **this age** or in the **age to come**.*

In Ephesians chapter 1 Paul writes about Christ now reigning at the right hand of the Father and goes on to say Jesus is *far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in **this age** but also in **the one to come**.*

The Bible makes this distinction several times in various ways – between the present age and the age to come. But, what separates those two ages?

In Mark chapter 10 verse 30 Jesus spoke about the blessings we have through faith now, but also about what we will receive in the **age to come** – and what we receive is **eternal life**. So the resurrection of the dead marks the beginning of the age to come.

Similarly in 1 Corinthians 15 verse 22 we read

*For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then **at his coming** those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

We refer to this as “the general resurrection” and it will happen at Christ’s coming, and He reigns now in glory until then, until the last enemy is destroyed, which happens at the resurrection and judgment.

We find Jesus talking about “the last day”. In John chapter 6 verse 44 – He says of anyone who believes in Him “***I will raise him up on the last day***”, which is the general resurrection. Whilst in John chapter 12 verse 48 he said “*The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will **judge him on the last day.***” Which is the final judgment.

Therefore, the return of Christ, the general resurrection and the final judgment all go together, on the last day. All this seems fairly simple, it is reflected in the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. It has been the settled teaching of the Church from the New Testament to the great Councils and beyond.

When will it be

But when will it be? If we are to be ready then surely we need to know when.

Jesus said: *But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, **nor the Son**, but only the Father. (Mark 13.32)*

Given what Jesus said, it is remarkable that so many people have claimed to know when He will return.

Some have argued, that whilst Jesus said we can't know the day or hour, but we can know the month or year. That may or may not be linguistically possible, but it does twist what Jesus said.

Nevertheless, Jesus warned people to be on the lookout. He spoke, for example, about how people could tell from fig trees, their tender branches and leaves, that summer was on the way. Having then spoken about certain events he said:

So also when you see these things taking place, you know that He is near, at the very gates. (Mark 13.29)

But as we look at history we see again and again people who looked at the events of their own time and became convinced that they were witnessing the very events Jesus spoke about.

The problem with some who have gone before is that rather than just taking to heart the instruction Jesus gave about godliness and holiness, they have instead come up with all sorts of ideas about what people should do, including armed conflict, and handing over possession to leaders or movements.

Nevertheless, there are other things that the Bible says will happen before Jesus comes again.

Events before the end

First, the gospel must be preached to the whole world. Jesus said

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

Can we say that has happened today? There are probably believers in all nations, but there are hundreds of millions who have not heard the gospel.

This seems to be what Paul is writing about in Romans chapter 11. Some think it means that before the end large numbers of Israelites will be converted. But Paul has spent chapters writing about how by faith non-Jews become children of Abraham, and then about branches being broken off the vine, which is Israel, and others grafted in by faith. He says that when the fullness of the non-Jews has come in, so all Israel will be saved – meaning all those who are children of Abraham by faith, not by physical descent.

Secondly, Jesus also spoke about their being **tribulation**. That word is used more than forty times in the New Testament and translated in various ways. The disciples were to expect tribulation, and tribulation came. In the Book of Revelation we see that John, and the seven churches to whom he was to pass on messages from Jesus, were all going through tribulation.

Jesus also spoke about severe tribulation. Some think this lies in the future, others that He was referring to the siege of Jerusalem in AD70, and the slaughter and destruction of the city and of the Temple of the Lord.

Revelation also refers to the Great Tribulation which could be a worse time yet to come, but could also refer to the long years of tribulation that the followers of Christ have endured. For most, if not all the last 2,000 years, believers have faced terrible suffering in one part of the world or another.

Thirdly, there is mention of particular individuals. Paul writes about the **man of lawlessness** in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2, and John about the **antichrist** in his first two letters. It has been a popular hobby of some to try to identify these people – and many protestants have been keen to name the Pope as one or the other, or both.

In 2 Thessalonians Paul was warning against people who said that Christ had already returned. Paul is saying, he can't have returned, because the man of lawlessness has not yet been revealed. That sounds like it is a future event, but some say otherwise. Paul also says the man of lawlessness has been restrained and when he is revealed it is to be killed and utterly. He will be destroyed by Christ.

John says that his hearers had heard that **antichrist** was coming in the last hour. But John says many antichrists had already come and were deceiving people – and because of that they knew they were living in the last hour.

If John says that was the last hour, then surely either He was wrong, or we are still in the last hour, because we know that Christ will return at the end of the end of the age. It is always the last hour until then, and we don't know when the hour will be.

Therefore, there could be worse to come, but all through this present age we should expect trouble, tribulation, and deception. When Christ comes again, He will bring it all to judgment, and to an end.

Therefore, we should not be led astray, as Paul and John both warned, but in godliness and holiness, we should be ready whenever the day and hour might be.

Then **finally**, Revelation chapter 20 mentions a period of **1,000 years**.

Some say that when Christ returns, He will reign for a thousand years and the devil will be imprisoned and then there will be the final judgment.

Others say that the thousand years is a period when the progress of the gospel is such that there will be relative peace on earth, following which Christ will return as judge.

But, as I pointed out earlier, we should start with the simple things, the things that are clear. The present age continues until the return of Christ. When He returns, the dead will be raised and He will judge. Then the new age begins.

On that understanding there is no space for 1,000 years between those events. Therefore we should understand Revelation 20 differently.

Revelation is a vision in which John saw and heard things. He recorded faithfully what was revealed to Him, but that does not necessarily mean what he saw or heard was the actual reality. It is clear that at times he struggled to put into words what he was seeing (like a vast city thousands of miles in three dimensions dressed as a bride) but each detail was significant. Similarly in places like the book of Daniel he was told about 70 weeks, which equates to 490 days. That was a mystery to people, until Christ came. If we take the most obvious date for Daniel the 490 years appears to equate to the birth of Christ. Year, not days, one thing symbolic of another, much as in parable, one thing is described, but it is the parallel that matters.

All this seems to mean that the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20 is the present reign of Christ, since He ascended into heaven and now sits at the right hand of the Father, until He comes again. Many early Christian writers were clear about this, though some did take it literally, believing that the end would come around AD1000.

During this present age the Devil is restrained, despite what some seem to think. We are told that all we have to do is resist him and he will flee from us. Whilst Hebrews chapter 2 verse 14 tells us plainly that Jesus died to *destroy the one who has power of death, that is, the devil*

You might think the devil scary, but what damage can he do to you if you trust in Christ. You are told rather to resist him and he will flee from you. It was very apparent in the ministry of Jesus, that evil spirits could not resist Him.

The devil is restrained, because Christ has won the victory.

Conclusion

The Apostles Creed sticks to the basic facts:-
Christ will come again on the last day.
That day will mark the end of this present age
On that day the dead will be raised
He will judge the living and the dead
So will the age to come will begin.

Knowing these things, what sort of person ought you to be? As we saw in 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 10 we are to be concerned with holiness and godliness, as it says in verse 14, with being without spot or blemish.

Interesting though the future events may be, our character, our lives are what matter. Although it might seem odd, that passage in Peter all tells us that by doing such things we are hastening the coming of that day.