

# Benedict XVI, Catholic Doctrine and the Problem of an Imminent *Parousia*

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**Abstract:** *In the effort to advance a more biblically sound theology within the Church, this article shows how the theological principles and exegetical practice of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI provide an outstanding example of how to implement the above mandate of Dei Verbum as highlighted in the International Theological Commission's recent work. The article applies Ratzinger's thought to concrete biblical texts involving the New Testament's ostensibly failed expectation that Christ's parousia would occur within the apostolic period. The question that arises from a reading of these texts is quite simple: Why has Christ not come back yet like he seemed to say he would? By searching out the intention of Scripture's sacred authors in relation to the expectation of an imminent parousia, Ratzinger offers a compelling apology for the existence of thorny biblical texts and dogmatic formulas within the Catholic tradition.*

## Introduction

As *Theology Today* recalls, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council envisioned the task of exegesis as that of ascertaining “what God has wished to communicate to us.”<sup>1</sup> In the effort to advance a more biblically sound theology within the Church, this article will show how the theological principles and exegetical practice of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI provide an outstanding example of how to implement the above mandate of *Dei Verbum* as highlighted in the International Theological Commission's recent work.<sup>2</sup>

Given that the study of Scripture is the soul of theology, the article will apply Ratzinger's thought to concrete biblical texts, specifically those involving the New Testament's ostensibly failed expectation that Christ's Second Coming (*parousia*)

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1. Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, 12; International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria* (2012), 22.
  2. Note that this article at times refers to the one man Ratzinger/Benedict by his surname and other times by papal name in the effort to distinguish writings composed during his pontificate from those preceding it.

would occur within the apostolic period.<sup>3</sup> The question that arises from a reading of these texts is quite simple: Why has Christ not come back yet like he seemed to say he would? By searching out the intention of Scripture's sacred authors in relation to the expectation of an imminent *parousia*, Ratzinger offers a compelling apology for the existence of thorny biblical texts and dogmatic formulas within the Catholic tradition. In the present article I will begin with a survey of problematic biblical and magisterial texts to establish the parameters of the problem at hand, after which a solution will be advanced in light of magisterial texts and the corpus of Ratzinger/Benedict XVI.

## Biblical Texts Seemingly Incompatible with the Events of History

Accurately reaffirming the Catholic magisterial tradition, *Theology Today* teaches that Sacred Scripture is inspired by God and that dogmas reflect definitively revealed truths binding on the universal Church. To make its case for the latter, the International Theological Commission routinely cites its earlier work *The Interpretation of Dogma*, which affirms that "the *Paradosis* [tradition] of the Church is universally valid and unchangeable in substance."<sup>4</sup> Based on the authority of the First Vatican Council, this document makes it clear that dogmas are "irreversible" and that in their regard "there can be no departure from the meaning once and for all defined by the Church."<sup>5</sup> The dogma of the *parousia* is no exception to this rule. There is abundant evidence of hope for the Second Coming of Christ within the New Testament and apostolic tradition, a teaching enshrined in the creed promulgated already at the First Council of Nicea and still affirmed today.<sup>6</sup> Difficulties arise, however, when one compares the content of the New Testament's hope to the actual events of history. In what follows, I will introduce just a few thorny biblical texts that illustrate this problem. Then I will bring the problem into even greater relief by high-

3. On Scripture as the soul of theology, see *Dei Verbum*, 24 and *Theology Today*, 21.

4. International Theological Commission, *The Interpretation of Dogma* (1989), A.II.1.

5. International Theological Commission, *The Interpretation of Dogma*, B.II.1; cf. First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*, ch. 4. Warning against relativism in the field of dogma and insisting upon the importance of maintaining the Church's precise dogmatic language, the document also draws from Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, 24 and Pius XII, *Humani Genensis*, 14-17. The latter is particularly harsh on those who "want to reduce to a minimum the meaning of dogmas" and thus "cherish the hope that when dogma is stripped of the elements which they hold to be extrinsic to divine revelation, it will compare advantageously with the dogmatic opinions of those who are separated from the unity of the Church." *Ibid.*, 14.

6. Though this article generally refers to the Second Coming of Christ with the Greek term *parousia* (cf. 1 Cor 15:23; 2 Thess 2:1), the New Testament employs several other terms and expressions to denote the same expectation: *epiphaneia* (2 Thess 2: 8); *apokalypsis* (1 Pet 4:13); "that Day" (2 Tim 1:12); "the day of the Lord" (1 Thess 5:2); "the day when the Son of man is revealed" (Luke 17:30); and "the last day" (John 6:39-40). The Second Coming is likewise graphically portrayed in the words of Jesus and throughout the New Testament without using these precise terms. Unless otherwise indicated, English translations of Scripture in this article will be taken from the Revised Standard Version (RSV). Italics have been added for emphasis.

lighting certain magisterial statements which appear to conflict with these texts and with the events of history.

### *1 Thessalonians 4:13-18*

One of the earliest New Testament works, dating to around 50 A.D., 1 Thessalonians offers a privileged vantage point from which to catch a glimpse of the nascent Church's mind concerning the *parousia* of Christ:

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that *we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord*, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; *then we who are alive, who are left*, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Here we are presented with one of the clearest indications that the Apostles expected Christ to return within their lifetimes. To be sure, one may raise the question of whether Paul intended his words to be taken literally or rather to be read in light of a broader apocalyptic genre, yet it is difficult to ignore the discrepancy between his words and the events of history.

### *1 Corinthians 7:29 and 15:51-52*

Another very early text, composed around 54-57 A.D., 1 Corinthians seems to reflect a similar outlook and circumstances to that which we find in 1 Thessalonians. In 1 Cor 7 Paul offers practical instructions to guide the behavior of the young community, his assumption being that these Christians were living in an interim state awaiting Christ's imminent return: "I mean, brethren, *the appointed time has grown very short*; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none" (7:29).

Paul's discourse on the resurrection in 1 Cor 15:51-52 reveals this same outlook: "Lo! I tell you a mystery. *We shall not all sleep*, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed." The allusion to the trumpet also resonates with the discourse mentioned above in 1 Thessalonians (4:16). It is difficult to get around the ostensible fact that Paul expected some people alive in his day to still be alive when Christ returned in glory.<sup>7</sup>

7. It is also worth mentioning what the Gospel of John has to say concerning Christ's return: "When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about this man?' Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!' The say-

*Mark 13 with its parallels in Matt 24 and Luke 21*

Jesus' discourse in Mark 13, narrated also in the other Synoptic Gospels, is couched in an apocalyptic genre not meant to be interpreted in an overly literal fashion. Wars, earthquakes, famines, trials, false Christs, stars falling, and the like abound in these passages. Some of what Jesus says here, however, is difficult not to take as a literal prediction of the future:

And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven... So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. *Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place.* Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come (13:26-33).

What precisely Jesus is predicting here has been the subject of scholarly debate for some time, but whether he intended it as a literal prediction of the end of time, the fall of the Temple, or something else, two things are clear: On the one hand, Jesus affirms that no one knows the precise day or hour of his return; on the other hand, he seems clearly to affirm that "this generation will not pass away before all these things take place." When read only in light of the Gospel itself, a figurative reading of this text seems compelling. However, when approached in light of the unity of Scripture—in particular the texts from Paul described above dating from roughly the same period—a strong case could be made that Jesus intended to describe something more vast and definitive than the end of the Jewish world, namely, the end of the world itself.

## **Magisterial Texts Seemingly Incompatible with the Scriptures and History**

A second set of difficulties concerning the *parousia* arises within a 1915 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC).<sup>8</sup> While the problems presented

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ing spread abroad among the brethren that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?'" (John 21:21-23). As John reports Jesus raising a question rather than making a positive assertion, this text is relatively easy to reconcile with the events of history in comparison with the above texts from Paul.

8. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *On the Parousia or Second Coming of Our Lord in the Letters of St. Paul the Apostle* (June 18, 1915). The English translation reproduced here is taken from Dean Béchar, *The Scripture Documents* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 207-208. Italics have been added for emphasis.

by this text may at first appear trivial in comparison with those found in Scripture, it must be remembered that at this time the PBC served as an organ of the Magisterium, thus making the discrepancy between its teachings and modern approaches (including that of Benedict XVI discussed below) much more significant.<sup>9</sup> Like the other *responsa* issued by the PBC at the time, this document follows a question-and-answer format, the answers representing the Magisterium's teaching on the matter in question.

Question 1: Whether it is permissible for a Catholic exegete, in solving difficulties that occur in the Letters of St. Paul and the other apostles, where the so-called "Parousia" or Second Coming of our Lord Jesus is mentioned, to assert that the apostles, although they teach no error under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, nevertheless do express their own human views, into which error or deception can enter.

Response 1: Negative.

This answer combats the notion that Scripture contains certain statements which issue from the pen of human authors who are liable to err when they are not writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In other words, what is condemned here is the attempt to preserve biblical inerrancy by saying that problematic parts of Scripture are not inspired but rather constitute merely the expression of the human author's point of view. In line with the PBC's statement, Vatican II would preclude this approach by affirming that "the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author."<sup>10</sup>

In the same section of *Dei Verbum* cited above and reprised by the PBC, the council further teaches that "everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit."<sup>11</sup> It is therefore not possible to admit that only certain parts of Scripture are inspired or that certain parts affirm erroneous human views. How, then, are we to account for the presence of the biblical texts mentioned above if not by admitting that they merely expressed the erroneous views of their respective human authors? To give a hint of the argument which will be made further below, the key to addressing discrepancies between magisterial texts like this and the manifest sense of biblical texts like those described above lies in determining just what the sacred authors are asserting in a given instance. For Pope Benedict XVI, the exegete's endeavor must be to ascertain the "fundamental

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9. The commission was restructured by Paul VI in 1971 so that it no longer acts as an official organ of the Magisterium but rather as an advisory forum in which the Magisterium and expert exegetes work together in the quest to illumine matters concerning Sacred Scripture.

10. Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, 11.

11. Ibid. See *Theology Today*, 22 as well as the ITC's earlier document, *The Interpretation of Dogma*, C. I. 3.

message” and “essential points” being made in texts which appear to contradict the facts of history.<sup>12</sup>

Turning now to the second question of the PBC decree in question, we are presented with a question which raises the stakes in our conversation about the relationship between history, dogma, and exegesis. I have abbreviated the question due to its length and convoluted grammatical structure:

Question 2: Whether . . . it is fitting to affirm that the apostle Paul certainly declared in his writings nothing that is not in perfect harmony with that ignorance of the time of the Parousia, which Christ himself proclaimed to obtain among human beings.

Response 2: Affirmative.

This text contains a double negative that makes it grammatically challenging, but taking that out one finds that the PBC teaches it is “fitting” to affirm that what Paul taught concerning the *parousia* was “in perfect harmony” with what Jesus said on the topic—namely that we know neither the day nor the hour when he will come again. The underlying reference is to Mark 13:32 discussed above.

The expression “whether . . . it is fitting” (*utrum . . . oporteat*) is perhaps significant. While the English translation I have reproduced employs the relatively mild term “fitting,” this verb frequently takes on the stronger meaning of “demanded,” “proper,” “right,” “requisite,” “inevitable,” “reasonably expected,” or “required.”<sup>13</sup> Is the PBC *requiring* Catholics to affirm that Paul’s teaching concerning the time of the *parousia* is perfectly consonant with that of Jesus? When one takes into account the overall tenor of the PBC documents from this period it seems unlikely that the commission would have been open to acknowledging a discrepancy between the thought of Paul and Jesus. In summary, in this question we observe the PBC teaching that both Paul and Jesus affirmed the impossibility of knowing when the time of the Second Coming would be. However, the fact remains that this reply has yet to offer a sufficient *argument* that confronts the problem of the early Church apparently erring in its expectations concerning the Second Coming. Does it in any way leave room for the possibility that Paul thought Christ would return in his lifetime even while he himself did not claim to know the precise hour? Once again to anticipate

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12. For a thorough treatment of Benedict’s method of searching out the essence or kernel of key problematic biblical texts, see my *Dark Passages of the Bible: Engaging Scripture with Benedict XVI and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), especially chapter 4.

13. The following meanings are taken from the entry *oportet* in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P.G.W. Glare (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 1254-55: 1: “It is demanded by some principle or standard, it is proper, right, requisite, etc. (often represented by Eng. ‘ought,’ ‘should’);” 2: “(in a confident precision) It is bound to happen, it is inevitable”; 3: “(expr. The presumed certainty of a fact) It must surely be the case, it may be reasonably expected”; 4: “To require (to be done, etc.).” I offer gratitude to my erudite colleague Edward Macierowski for his assistance with navigating the nuances of the Latin in this text.

our answer below, it should be noted that this PBC document primarily served a practical purpose. It was not concerned with providing sophisticated arguments but rather with giving concise, concrete guidance to Catholic exegetes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, I would like to turn our attention briefly to the third question of the PBC's document on the *parousia*:

Question 3: Whether, after considering [the phrase “we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord” of 1 Thess 4:15] . . . we may reject as far-fetched and unfounded the explanation traditional in Catholic schools . . . which explains the words of St. Paul in 1 Thess 4:15-17 without in any way implying the affirmation of a Parousia so imminent that the apostle added himself and his readers to those of the faithful who would survive to meet Christ.

Response 3: Negative.

This question makes a particularly helpful contribution to our discussion because it explicitly addresses a biblical text that has proved to be a stumbling block for exegetes, a text which numbers among the texts already mentioned above when introducing the problem of the *parousia*. If I am reading the document correctly, here the PBC is not demanding that Catholic exegetes reject the possibility that Paul thought the *parousia* would occur in his lifetime. Rather, the question is phrased so as to teach that the traditional explanation (i.e. the view that Paul did *not* expect the Second Coming in his day) is not to be rejected as far-fetched and unfounded. There is quite a difference between these two statements, the truth of which the commission members certainly would have been aware. If the approach here is the same as we find in the PBC's other decrees from this period, such language was probably devised deliberately in order to avoid an imprudent blanket condemnation of the view that Paul expected Christ to return in his lifetime.

## **Towards a Solution: Principles and Illustrations from Benedict XVI's Exegesis**

The aim of this article to this point has been to cast in relief key biblical and magisterial texts which illustrate the discrepancy between the events of history and the early Church's apparently mistaken expectation of the *parousia* within the first-century. Now it is time to turn to the more positive side of things as we elucidate principles and apply them in practice in view of a solution to the aforementioned problems. The principles below will be drawn from magisterial and curial texts as well as from the corpus of Benedict XVI/Joseph Ratzinger, while said principles will be illustrated in light of germane works on the subject by Ratzinger.

### *Benedict XVI on St. Paul and the Parousia*

Benedict speaks of the problem of the *parousia* in a number of places throughout his corpus, each of which contains particularities one would expect

in texts ranging across a span of decades and for audiences ranging from biblical scholars to ordinary lay Catholics. I would like to begin by considering the treatment found in Benedict's general audiences for the year of St. Paul. Here the pontiff explicitly addresses 1 Thess 4:13-18 discussed above, bearing especially in mind the words, "We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep." The pontiff begins by observing that this text—the first of Paul's letters and what some have deemed the earliest New Testament document—was likely written around 52 A.D. Contextualizing the letter, he adds that its purpose was to aid the Thessalonian church being "beset by doubts and problems."<sup>14</sup> This purpose will play an important role in our discussion below.

One who has read Pope Benedict enough will not be surprised at some of his ensuing observations which may afflict the comforted Catholic. He describes 1 Thessalonians as replete "with symbolic imagery, which, however, conveys a simple and profound message."<sup>15</sup> Benedict does not view 1 Thess 4 as a literal depiction of the Second Coming but rather as intending to convey theological truth through symbolic imagery. The "essential message," he says, is that "our future is to be with the Lord."<sup>16</sup> What we can take away from this is that, regardless of whether or not Paul expected an imminent *parousia*, he was not intending to make a claim or assertion on the subject of its timing. As the International Theological Commission wrote in its earlier work on eschatology, "[t]he early Christians, whether they thought that the *parousia* was imminent or considered it to be quite remote, soon learned through experience that some of them would be taken away by death before the *parousia*."<sup>17</sup> Persecution and martyrdom were constant threats for early Christians, and Paul's letter served to guide the nascent community through these story times. Irrespective of the precise moment when Christ himself would return, many knew that they would be meeting him face to face in the near future one way or another.

Moreover, it might be argued that the sense of 1 Thess 4 remains the same even if it could be demonstrated that Paul literally expected the Second Coming to be ushered in with an angel blowing a trumpet. We do not have to take this as a literal depiction of the *parousia* in order to respect the text as God's inspired word. In the marvelous chapter of his book *Miracles* entitled "Horrid Red Things," C.S. Lewis offers an evocative treatment of this type of imagery. He says, "Even if it can be shown, then, that the early Christians accepted their imagery literally, this would not mean that we are justified in relegating their doctrines as a whole to the lumber-room."<sup>18</sup> The early Christian belief concerning the *parousia* and other doctrines like it "would survive substantially unchanged" even after "the falsity of the earlier images had been recognized."<sup>19</sup> With striking similarity to the terminology employed by Benedict, Lewis argues that particular physical details about the end of time or the world to come "would not have been what [the sacred authors] cared about. . . .

14. Benedict XVI, *St. Paul* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 72.

15. *Ibid.*, 73.

16. *Ibid.*

17. International Theological Commission, *Some Current Questions in Eschatology*, 1990, 3. 1.

18. C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 119.

19. *Ibid.*

The difficulty here is that they were not writing as philosophers to satisfy speculative curiosity about the nature of God and the universe.”<sup>20</sup>

Like Benedict, Lewis affirms that images concerning how or when the *parousia* will take place do not constitute the purpose of the biblical texts in which they appear. According to the standards of *Dei Verbum* introduced above, these images are not erroneous because they are not asserted or taught for their own sake in the first place. As Benedict and Lewis show time and again in their writings, Christians should not be afraid to admit the presence of symbolic imagery or even myth in the Bible. Read Lewis, Tolkien, or Chesterton, and it is quite clear that myth does not equal falsehood.<sup>21</sup> To be sure, in a certain sense this makes the theologian’s task more difficult, as he has to search out the essential message of biblical texts and bring into relief their permanent dimension or core meaning as distinct from accidental features not part of the deposit of faith. This requires more patience and skill than simply saying every sentence of Scripture is true on its own terms apart from its context and without qualification.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, following this approach of Benedict and Lewis is liberating because Christians can be confident that there is always a core message God wants to convey to us in the Bible and that this remains unchanged even if we grant the presence of certain difficulties in the text or have to emend our previous reading of it.

Returning to Benedict’s catechesis, he next turns his attention to 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4, which reads:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

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20. Ibid., 119-20.

21. For just one of many possible illustrations from each author, see J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf: Including the Poem Mythopoeia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 48; C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, 146, 218; G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi; the Everlasting Man; St. Thomas Aquinas* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 233-47.

22. “It follows straightaway that neither the criterion of inspiration nor that of infallibility can be applied mechanically. It is quite impossible to pick out one single sentence and say, right, you find this sentence in God’s great book, so it must simply be true in itself.” Joseph Ratzinger, *God and the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 153; cf. Benedict XVI, Address to Participants in the Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (May 2, 2011): “Lastly, I would only like to mention the fact that in a good hermeneutic it is not possible to apply mechanically the criterion of inspiration, or indeed of absolute truth by extrapolating a single sentence or expression. The plan in which it is possible to perceive Sacred Scripture as a Word of God is that of the unity of God, in a totality in which the individual elements are illuminated reciprocally and are opened to understanding.”

Paul here warns his church, its members lest they be deceived in thinking an imminent Second Coming can be determined based on human calculations. He reminds his audience that “man of lawlessness” must come first, and that he plainly has not. Benedict for his part tells us that “the intention” of this text “is primarily practical.”<sup>23</sup> How so? Paul wrote this because he needed to correct Thessalonians who were rationalizing their neglect of worldly duties with the claim that the end was approaching soon anyway: “For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work” (2 Thess 3:11).

Teasing out Paul’s thought, Benedict teaches that the expectation of Jesus’ *parousia* does not dispense Christians of any epoch from working in the world but rather increases our responsibility to work *in* and *for* the world while not being *of* the world. This is but one of several examples in this catechesis of how Benedict characteristically follows his careful and critical exegesis with a spiritual exhortation for Christians to apply God’s word to our lives. He concludes by teaching that, while Christians today might not pray for the end to come soon in the same way St. John did (cf. Rev 16:22), we can and should pray for the Lord to put the injustices of the world to an end. We can also work for the world to be “fundamentally changed” into a “civilization of love.”<sup>24</sup>

That said, Benedict’s catechesis does not completely resolve the problem of the early expectation of the *parousia*, but it does help us to see that teaching the precise moment of the Second Coming was not Paul’s real point in the theologically thorny text of 1 Thessalonians.

### *Ratzinger’s Eschatology and the Parousia*

In contrast with his catechetical instructions on St. Paul discussed above, Ratzinger’s *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* was written in his capacity as a private theologian long before becoming pope. This book is pivotal because its proper object is the *eschaton*. It is revealing—and perhaps startling—to read the very first sentence of the book’s section entitled “The Expectation of an Imminent End.” Ratzinger plainly states, “[b]eyond a shadow of a doubt, the New Testament does contain unmistakable traces of an expectation that the world will end soon. Where do these traces come from? Do they go back to Jesus?”<sup>25</sup> In characteristic fashion, Ratzinger soberly raises the possibility that the New Testament got it wrong with respect to the timing of Christ’s Second Coming.

In the ensuing discussion, Ratzinger flexes his historical-critical muscles as he explores hypotheses that attempt to date the various New Testament texts dealing with the subject of the *parousia*. The standard maxim, he relates, is “the greater the stress on expectation of an imminent end, the older a text must be.”<sup>26</sup> As evidence for this, he observes that Matthew and Luke, composed (according to the standard view of Ratzinger and many modern scholars) later than Mark, speak of a “delay of

23. Benedict XVI, *St. Paul*, 73.

24. *Ibid.*, 77.

25. Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein and Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 35.

26. *Ibid.*

the arrival” of the Bridegroom whereas Mark does not. Benedict tells us, “[i]n such texts the waiting Church retrojects its own experience of the ‘delay’ of the *parousia* into the earlier sayings of Jesus.”<sup>27</sup>

Next Ratzinger turns his attention to 2 Peter as he observes, “In this epistle, one sees even more clearly how a later period reached a compromise between imminence and remoteness, and explained the *parousia*’s delay in theological fashion.”<sup>28</sup> 2 Pet 3:4 confronts the argument of those who would scoff and ask, “Where is the promise of his return?”<sup>29</sup> To this Peter replies:

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up (2 Pet 3:8-10).

Emphasizing that we cannot know the precise day or hour, Peter enjoins Christians to “be zealous to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace” (2 Pet 3:14).

At this point, however, Ratzinger tweaks the standard scholarly chronology of New Testament texts dealing with the *parousia*:

In themselves the examples given are doubtless cogent evidence for the thesis [that the older the biblical text, the greater the stress on an imminent end to the world] . . . Nevertheless, it is open to question whether one can infer from this anything like a general chronological principle whereby Christian origins are marked by an eschatology of radical imminence which would then be gradually toned down until one finally arrives at John, where, for Bultmann at least, temporal eschatology has been wholly eliminated in favor of its existential counterpart.<sup>30</sup>

One who reads read enough of Ratzinger/Benedict XVI’s writings on the subject of historical-critical scholarship (especially as exemplified in his *Jesus of Nazareth* series) will frequently observe that he at once demonstrates great respect to its findings and at the same time soberly acknowledges its limitations.<sup>31</sup> In this case, while acknowledging the presence of development within the thought of the New

27. Ibid., 35-36. As evidence for this claim, Ratzinger footnotes Matt 24:48 and 25:5 as well as Luke 12:45.

28. Ibid., 36.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. For an in-depth discussion of Ratzinger’s assessment of modern exegesis, see my *Dark Passages of the Bible*, especially chapter 2 on Benedict’s “Method C” hermeneutic in

Testament itself, he stresses modern scholarship's inability to furnish a strict chronology of biblical texts dealing with the *parousia*.<sup>32</sup> Not without a touch of irony does Ratzinger thus state: "Naturally, [the person who believes that later texts are more accurate with regard to the timing of the *parousia*] has to claim that John understood Jesus better than Jesus understood himself."<sup>33</sup>

Adducing evidence contrary to the presupposition that later means less imminent when it comes to the early Church's expectations of the *parousia*, Ratzinger writes that one commentator "has shown that the gospel Matthew, composed contemporaneously with Luke's (or perhaps even later) contains an undiminished imminent eschatology which may even be described as heightened in comparison with Mark."<sup>34</sup> How is this to be explained?

In some circumstances, an extreme form of temporal expectation might well be the product of a re-Judaizing process. The Judaism of Jesus' day had an overwhelming expectation of the imminent end. Such an expectation cannot be regarded, then, as something peculiarly characteristic of Jesus. The schema of linear development simply does not correspond to the facts.<sup>35</sup>

As evidence for this claim, Ratzinger recalls that Matthew is the only one of the Synoptic Gospels to depict the coming of the Son of Man in sudden fashion: "For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man" (Matt 24:27). In point of fact, he notes that Matthew is the only Gospel to employ the precise term *parousia*.<sup>36</sup>

What Benedict achieves here both helps our cause and simultaneously makes it more difficult. On the one hand, he makes it clear that the New Testament indeed

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which he offers a synthesis of the best of both ancient (Method A) and modern (Method B) exegesis.

32. Particularly illuminating are his comments concerning developments in the later Gospel of John. "That deepening of the idea of the Parousia achieved in the Fourth Gospel is not, therefore, when compared with the Synoptic tradition, something different and strange. Rather does it clarify the relation of the Parousia to the worldly time, something only lightly sketched in the Synoptics." *Eschatology*, 203. It is in this Gospel that the New Testament's conception of the *parousia* reaches full maturity: "It would take a careful analysis of the concepts of 'going' and 'coming' in the Farewell Discourse to display the idea of the Parousia in that mature form which was reached at the close of the New Testament development and passed on from there to the Church." *Ibid.*, 203-204. For an important treatment of doctrinal development within the New Testament itself, see the International Theological Commission's 1990 document *The Interpretation of Dogma*: "There is evidence even in the New Testament that there were stages in the arrival at truth: these expressions of truth reinforce one another mutually, go from depth to depth, but never contradict one another. It is always the identical mystery of God's salvation in Jesus Christ which has found expression in many forms and from different aspects" (B.I.3).

33. *Eschatology*, 36.

34. *Ibid.*, 37.

35. *Ibid.*, 37-38. For a further critique of an attempt to perceive a strictly linear development within Scripture, see Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xix. On the possibilities and limits of tracing doctrinal development within Scripture, see my *Dark Passages of the Bible*, in particular chapter 6 on the afterlife.

36. *Ibid.*, 38-39.

contains an “imminent eschatology” at various points and does not merely appear to do so. On the other hand, he has not yet offered an explanation for how such an admission is consonant with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. In other words, if we cannot respond to problematic texts by saying, “You’re reading it wrong—the apostles didn’t *really* think that the world was about to end,” then how is one supposed to respond to this challenge? Furthermore, to anticipate a point in the book *Jesus of Nazareth* treated below, Benedict’s thought also introduces yet another problem: that not only the early Church, but possibly even Jesus himself, expected the consummation of the world to be at hand in his day.

To counter these challenges, Ratzinger next turns his attention to “the text which lies at the heart of the problem”—Jesus’ eschatological discourse describing the fall of Jerusalem in Mark 13 along with its parallels in Matt 24 and Luke 21.<sup>37</sup> In particular he focuses on Matt 24:29-31, Mark 13:24-27, and Luke 21:25—each of which contains a unique narrative connecting the fall of Jerusalem and the *parousia* temporally. Ratzinger remarks, “[s]o far as our problem is concerned, it is extremely important to note how these two aspects—the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the Parousia—are temporally related.”<sup>38</sup> After pointing out that what Luke portrays “is not the end of the world but the start of a new age in salvation history,” he turns his attention to Mark, the most challenging of the texts concerning the problem under consideration in this article. “By contrast,” he relates, “Mark appears to present a direct temporal link between the fall of the city and the consummation of the world.”<sup>39</sup> Noting that the issue is more complex than this, Ratzinger wraps up his discussion by acknowledging, “[n]evertheless, the impression persists that the trials and tribulations entailed in the destruction of Jerusalem *are* connected in time with the events of the end of the world.”<sup>40</sup> As further evidence of this connection, he adds later in the book, “[e]ven in his own age, Paul believed that he had in fact offered the Gospel to the whole inhabited world. The demand that the Gospel would be preached to all the world seemed thus already fulfilled in the generation of the apostles, what the Markan Jesus calls ‘this generation.’”<sup>41</sup>

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37. *Ibid.*, 38.

38. *Ibid.*, 39.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, 40 (emphasis Ratzinger’s). For example, recalling that Matthew converts Mark’s schematic *in illo tempore* (“in those days”) into his *euthys*, Ratzinger immediately follows by arguing that the latter should not be translated “immediately” but rather “suddenly,” adding that “the entire assertion [should be] interpreted accordingly.”

41. *Ibid.*, 199. This is not the only place in Ratzinger’s corpus in which he describes Paul’s conviction in this manner. For example, he made the following remark in a speech to catechists: “Of course, at the end of his life Paul believed that he had proclaimed the Gospel to the very ends of the earth, but the Christians were small communities dispersed throughout the world, insignificant according to the secular criteria. In reality, they were the leaven that penetrates the meal from within and they carried within themselves the future of the world.” Joseph Ratzinger, Address to Catechists and Religion Teachers for the Jubilee of Catechists (December 12, 2000). For an illuminating text concerning the assumption that the Gospel had been preached to all creatures, see Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., Saint Thomas et les non-chrétiens,” *Revue thomiste* 106 (2006): 17-49.

As Ratzinger is always so good at doing, he moves to summarize and tell his readers what they are to take home from the foregoing discussion: “What ought we to think of these internal divergences within the Synoptic tradition and the issue which they concern?” He immediately answers: “In the first place, the single Gospel is heard only in the quartet of the four evangelists (for John belongs there too!). The word of Jesus persists only as something heard and received by the Church.”<sup>42</sup> We find Ratzinger stating here what he has said in many other places, a teaching which is but an echo of *Dei Verbum* and *Theology Today*: the inerrancy of biblical texts is not to be found looking at them in isolation, but rather within the unity of the entire Word of God contained in Scripture and Tradition and lived by the Church.<sup>43</sup> Hence, if Mark’s text seems to present problems, we need to look at what the other Evangelists say on the topic and evaluate Mark’s central purpose in light of that knowledge. We also must bear in mind the entirety of Sacred Tradition, cognizant that Christianity is not primarily a “religion of the book” but rather of the living Word, the person Jesus Christ. *Theology Today*, echoing Ratzinger’s language, thus teaches that the Scriptures are “witnesses of faith” and “testify” to the Gospel revelation which is something still greater within which the Bible finds its proper context.<sup>44</sup>

When it comes to the timing of the *parousia* and whether the early Church erred with an expectation that Christ would return in the apostolic era, Ratzinger argues:

*The decisive point* is surely that the New Testament writings leave open the nature of the difference between literary schema and reality in this connection. . . . Schema and reality are differently related by different authors, but *none of them makes the bold claim* to an identity between the two. . . . Since *what interests them* is not the question of exact chronological succession or a possible causality of development but the inner unity of the whole, they are able to present their material in schematic *blocs*, united by schematic connections . . . It can only be laid out in some way that *the governing affirmations* of their message suggest.<sup>45</sup>

By distinguishing “schema” from “reality,” Ratzinger moves us away from a rigid literalism that would, in the name of reading the Bible “at face value,” miss its primary message conveyed through the literary artistry of the various sacred authors.

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42. *Ibid.*, 40.

43. On the importance of reading individual texts in light of the unity of Scripture, see *Dei Verbum*, 12 and *Theology Today*, 22.

44. This terminology appears a number of times within the document. For example, see *Theology Today*, 7, 26, and 30: “The gospel of God is fundamentally testified by the sacred Scripture of both Old and New Testaments . . . Tradition is the faithful transmission of the Word of God, witnessed in the canon of Scripture by the prophets and the apostles and in the *leiturgia* (liturgy), *martyria* (testimony) and *diakonia* (service) of the Church.” *Ibid.*, 7. For a more thorough discussion of how the Scriptures witness or attest to revelation, see my *Dark Passages of the Bible*, especially 7n8 and 65-66.

45. *Eschatology*, 41-42 (emphasis added).

“What interests them,” he observes, is not the issue of what precise moment the Second Coming will take place. Rather, “the governing affirmations of their message”<sup>46</sup> suggest something different, something observable in the author’s treatment of Paul above. For Ratzinger this is the critical point: in dealing with the *parousia*, the biblical authors subordinate the question of timing to the question of how Christians ought to behave regardless of when Christ returns. For all we know, some biblical authors may have expected Christ to return in their day, as many texts seem to indicate. But what Ratzinger demonstrates is that these expectations are not being asserted or taught any more than the author of Genesis was trying to provide a timeline for the world’s creation.<sup>47</sup> Jesus may return today, or he may return millennia upon millennia from now, but irrespective of this eventuality, the reality is that Christians of all ages have to be awake and prepared. For, even if Christ does not return to earth in our lifetime, this fact remains: we each will be meeting him face to face within a number of minutes to a number of decades, and the precise moment of this meeting will likely occur most unexpectedly.

#### *Benedict XVI’s Jesus of Nazareth and the Parousia*

To see what excellent Catholic exegesis looks like, there is no better place to look than the three volumes of Benedict XVI’s *Jesus of Nazareth*. In this section we will follow the lead of our emeritus pontiff in the chapter entitled “Jesus’ Eschatological Discourse” from the second volume of the trilogy. The discourse Benedict has in his sights is roughly the same as that treated above in his work *Eschatology*. For insight into Benedict’s mind on this matter, it is significant that he begins his discussion with these words: “This discourse, found in all three Synoptic Gospels with certain variations, could perhaps be described as the most difficult text in the whole of the Gospels.”<sup>48</sup> This fear-inspiring claim should remain with us and keep us humble as we proceed in our work of exegeting Benedict’s exegesis.

One of the pope’s first paragraphs on the subject reveals striking similarities with his treatment of the *parousia* explored above:

While this vision of things to come is expressed largely through *images* drawn from tradition, *intended* to point us towards *realities* that defy description, the difficulty of the content is compounded by all the problems arising from the text’s redaction history: the very fact that Jesus’ words here are *intended* as continuations of tradition rather than literal descriptions of things to come meant that the redactors of the material could take these continuations a stage further, in the light of their particular situations and their audience’s capacity to understand,

46. *Ibid.*, 41-42.

47. For a formidable treatment of this point in relation to Genesis, see Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

48. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 26-27.

while taking care to remain true to the *essential content* of Jesus' message.<sup>49</sup>

Here we find key terms and expressions which recur throughout Benedict's corpus and so reveal what he considers the key to solving our problem. In *Eschatology* he distinguished "schema" or literary presentation from "reality," while in this text he makes a similar distinction between "images" and "realities." The images or literary presentation, he observes, are bound up with the Gospels' redaction history—referring to the process by which the biblical books were gradually compiled, edited, and adapted until reaching their canonical form. Like many historical-critical scholars, Benedict does not assume that the Gospels contain a word-for-word transcript of Jesus' discourses at every point. Rather, Jesus' words here represent "continuations of tradition"—tradition which preceded Jesus and was developed both by Jesus and the early Church after his return to the Father. Thus Benedict relates that "the redactors of the material could take these continuations a stage further, in the light of their particular situations and their audience's capacity to understand."<sup>50</sup>

How, then, do we know what the truth of the matter is? Do we really know what Jesus said concerning his Second Coming? Could Jesus himself, whose teaching itself forms part of a continually developing tradition, have erred? What Benedict states—tersely but profoundly—is that the Evangelists took care "to remain true to the essential content of Jesus' message."<sup>51</sup> Here again as elsewhere in his corpus, Benedict searches out the *intention* of a particular biblical passage in order to ascertain its *essential content*. He is clear that not every single word in Scripture is being asserted or taught for its own sake, and so difficult passages must be understood within the whole of each individual author's work and in light of the entirety of Scripture. For that matter, Benedict is even aware that Jesus himself employs images which are by their very nature imperfect. Jesus affirms the substance of said images without the intention of formally incorporating them in their entirety into his message.<sup>52</sup>

As for the question of whether a given statement can be verified as a direct quote from Jesus, Benedict is open to various answers, but he reminds his audience that this is actually a peripheral issue. To draw a distinction inspired by Aquinas, we know the essence or substance of Jesus' message, but the extent to which we can verify its many features as issuing from Jesus' own human mouth is an accidental matter. Hence Benedict states, "The extent to which *particular details* of the escha-

49. *Ibid.*, 27 (emphasis added).

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*

52. For instance, in discussing the image of Hades in Luke 16 Benedict explains: "Jesus uses ideas that were current in the Judaism of his time. Hence we must not force our interpretation of this part of the text. Jesus adopts existing images, *without formally incorporating* them into his teaching about the next life. Nevertheless, *he does unequivocally affirm the substance of the images*...But, as we saw earlier, this is not the principal message that the Lord wants to convey in this parable. Rather, as Jeremias has convincingly shown, *the main point*—which comes in the second part of the parable—is the rich man's request for a sign." *Jesus of Nazareth*, 215-16 (emphasis added).

tological discourse are attributable to Jesus himself we need not consider here. That he foretold the demise of the temple—its theological demise, that is, from the standpoint of salvation history—is beyond doubt.”<sup>53</sup> What is Benedict getting at with this talk of the Temple’s “theological demise”? Why not just speak of the physical demise it underwent at the hands of the Romans in A.D. 70? It seems to me that Benedict speaks in this way so as to leave open the question of whether or not Jesus foretold the destructive events in question.<sup>54</sup> The pontiff thus argues:

[T]he *nucleus* of Jesus’ prophecy is concerned not with the outward events of war and destruction, but with the demise of the Temple in salvation-historical terms, as it becomes a “deserted house.” It ceases to be the locus of God’s presence and the locus of atonement for Israel, indeed, for the world.<sup>55</sup>

The term “nucleus” is employed frequently by Benedict to denote a text’s essential content or core. In this case, then, it seems that Benedict wishes to carefully signal that the issue of whether Jesus prophesied the *physical* demise of the temple is an accidental issue when it comes to the gospel message. By no means does Benedict speak in this way out of indifference or lack of careful attention to the biblical text; rather, precisely out of respect for the text he draws a distinction to make sense out of what would otherwise be a contradiction. Here we witness Benedict humbly welcoming the questions and observations of modern scholars which at first glance appear incompatible with the Christian tradition. His genius, however, does not lie

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53. *Ibid.*, 34-35.

54. For background into this problem, it is important to recall the doubt of modern scholars concerning whether Jesus prophesied the end of the Temple. This approach assumes that the Gospel authors sought to convey Jesus’ message by putting words into his mouth after the events had unfolded in history, and for this reason they would not consider the words in question here true prophecies. One of the criticisms that Benedict has leveled at certain scholars is precisely their presupposition that miracles and prophecy cannot occur. In particular, see the first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*, especially where he identifies as “the fundamental dogma” of modernity the belief that God cannot act in history. *Ibid.*, 35-36. On this subject see also his famous lecture “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict: On the Foundations and the Itinerary of Exegesis Today,” in *Opening up the Scriptures: Joseph Ratzinger and the Foundations of Biblical Interpretation*, eds. José Granados, Carlos Granados, and Luis Sánchez-Navarro (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 1-29. Just as incisive are his lesser-known remarks concerning modernity’s assumption that only what is visible or empirically verifiable is true: “In today’s context, the impossibility of passing beyond what is apparent, that is, of passing beyond phenomena, has indeed become a kind of dogma.” This “so-called modern worldview,” which Ratzinger associates with Bultmann in this text, entails a “dictatorship of appearances.” Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, “Faith, Truth and Culture: Some Reflections on the Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*,” in *Truth and Tolerance* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 183-209. That said, Benedict does not throw the baby out with the bath water when it comes to modern exegesis. Not all those who practice historical-critical exegesis go about their business with a “ready-made philosophy” that is closed to the possibility of divine intervention in the world. Benedict is sober enough to realize that certain scholarly conclusions may be correct despite their being bound up with problematic presuppositions.

55. *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*, 46.

in this charitable attitude alone. It consists in the fact that he entertains the best of modern thought *while at the same time* remaining true to the constant tradition of the Church, endeavoring a synthesis between the two at points where most people (on both sides of the exegetical isle) would say rapprochement is impossible.

Benedict does not stop here, however. His ensuing discussion nuances to the foregoing argument. Immediately after elucidating what he considers to be the nucleus of Jesus' eschatological discourse, he adds that "the nucleus of Jesus' eschatological message includes the proclamation of an age of the nations."<sup>56</sup> This age is the time of the Church, which the Bible portrays as the intervening period following the time of Jesus' earthly pilgrimage and preceding his return in glory. For Benedict this point is highly relevant because it reveals there to be more than one voice in the New Testament concerning the question of when Jesus will return. For Benedict, the Bible is like a mosaic or stained-glass window with many different pieces that only make sense when looked at as a whole.<sup>57</sup> It is therefore not as if the entire Church were in a state of confusion and error in expecting an imminent *parousia*. Benedict writes, "It seems obvious to me that several of Jesus' parables . . . speak of this time of the Church; from the perspective of a purely imminent eschatology, they would make no sense."<sup>58</sup> He likewise states, "[f]rom the content, it is clear that all three Synoptic Gospels recognize a time of the Gentiles: the end of the world can come only when the Gospel has been brought to all peoples."<sup>59</sup> To be sure, the pontiff is not backing away from his earlier admission that certain passages explicitly state that "this generation will not pass away" before the end (Matt 24:34). At the same time, he is well aware that other texts suggest the *parousia* will not occur "until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Luke 21:24) and that "the Gospel must first be preached to all nations" (Mark 13:10; cf. Matt 24:14). To this he adds, "Paul, too, recognizes an age of the Gentiles, which is the present and which must be fulfilled if God's plan is to attain its goal."<sup>60</sup> In light of this evidence, one can appreciate that drawing a one-to-one correspondence between Jesus' use of eschatological imagery and his thought concerning the chronological end of the world would constitute a "superficial reading" of the Gospels.<sup>61</sup> Granted that the Gospels witness to a time of the Gentiles which must precede the *parousia*, we still remain faced with a stumbling block—the perception that certain early Christians thought the Gospel had in fact already reached all the nations.

How are we to square such an observation with our discussion up to this point? The reality is that certain biblical authors may have assumed that the Gospel had reached unto the ends of the earth and that Jesus was about to return in glory in their day. This cannot be proved beyond the shadow of a doubt, but neither can it be disproved simply by saying that they could not have thought this way since it would be tantamount to admitting the presence of an error in Scripture. Pope Bene-

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56. Ibid.

57. Ratzinger, *God and the World*, 101.

58. Ibid., 42.

59. Ibid., 49.

60. Ibid., 43.

61. Ibid., 41.

dict's approach is much more refined—and thus challenging—than this. Rather than coming down on one side or another on this question, he shows that the very issue is peripheral and could go either way:

The fact that the early Church was unable to assess the chronological duration of these *kairoi* ("times") of the Gentiles and that it was generally assumed they would be fairly short is ultimately *a secondary consideration*. *The essential point* is that these times were both asserted and foretold and that, above all else and prior to any calculation of their duration, they had to be understood and were understood by the disciples in terms of a mission.<sup>62</sup>

The bottom line is that the Bible does not formally assert the precise time of the Second Coming. Although we find indications of what individual apostles expected concerning the matter, Benedict understands that for them this was "ultimately a secondary consideration." Whether they thought the world was going to end within a day or a decade or a millennium, he tells us that the "essential point" they were asserting concerned the need for spiritual preparation, for mission, and for endurance in the face of persecution. It turns out that these are realities that must govern Christians' lives regardless of the epoch in which they live and how much time remains in their earthly pilgrimage.<sup>63</sup> They are the core message, the true key, to understanding the Bible's *parousia* passages. This is exactly what one would expect Benedict to say in light of his synthetic exegetical approach, an approach adopted by the PBC in its latest document in the effort to take seriously the literal sense of Scripture while also asking how it can be applied in the lives of Christians in every age.<sup>64</sup>

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62. *Ibid.*, 43 (emphasis added).

63. Though located within a discussion of the Sermon on the Mount, the following insight from Servais Pincakers, O.P. is equally applicable to the *parousia* texts in this article: "The expectation of the end time, the urging of the Spirit, and the threat of persecution certainly contributed a special vitality and forcefulness to the Gospel precepts. Yet nowhere in the Sermon itself do we find any textual reference to a time limit for the fulfillment of its injunctions." *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 138.

64. See *Theology Today*, 22: "It is in this context that exegesis searches for the literal sense and opens itself to the spiritual or fuller sense (*sensus plenior*) of scripture." The PBC here cross-references the commission's earlier work *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* as well as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 115-118. In the following sentence the commission explicitly cites Benedict XVI to further its case: "Only where both methodological levels, the historico-critical and the theological, are respected, can one speak of a theological exegesis, an exegesis worthy of this book." *Verbum Domini*, 34. For an in-depth treatment of how Benedict weds a critical reading of the literal sense with a theological reading of the spiritual sense and its relation to *lectio divina*, see my *Dark Passages of the Bible*, especially chapters 2, 5, and 6.

*The Adventus Medius in Benedict XVI's Theology*

The epilogue to Benedict's second volume of *Jesus of Nazareth* offers a final fascinating angle from which to make sense of thorny *parousia* texts within the New Testament. Reflecting on the subject of Christ's ascension and return in glory, he begins by dispelling a common yet mistaken assumption concerning the risen Jesus' message that he will come to judge all men and establish God's kingdom in the world:

There has been a substantial trend in recent theology to view this proclamation as the principal content, if not the very heart of the message. Thus it is claimed that Jesus himself was already thinking in exclusively eschatological categories. The "imminent expectation" of the kingdom was said to be the specific content of his message, while the original apostolic proclamation supposedly consisted of nothing else. Had this been the case, one might ask how the Christian faith could have survived when that imminent expectation was not fulfilled. In fact, this theory goes against the texts as well as the reality of nascent Christianity, which experienced the faith as a force in the present and at the same time as hope. The disciples undoubtedly spoke of Jesus' return, but first and foremost they bore witness to the fact that he is alive now.<sup>65</sup>

Benedict here responds to those who would claim that the "specific content" or core of Jesus' post-resurrection teaching concerned the prediction of his imminent return in glory. As we already have seen above, Benedict does not deny that the early Church may have expected an imminent *parousia*, but to make the further claim that the message "consisted of nothing else" would be utterly mistaken. To be sure, the disciples spoke of Jesus' return, but their primary concern was with the present. Again, as Benedict demonstrated above, the essential content of the apostolic message concerning the *parousia* was not its timing but rather the spiritual preparation and mission to be cultivated with urgency regardless of when Christ returns again.<sup>66</sup>

In subsequent pages Benedict turns from this issue of Christ's final return to ponder the possibility that there might be another "coming" of Christ between his coming in the flesh and his coming in glory at the end of time:

Is it not the case that he will come to us only on some unknown last day? *Can he come today as well?* These questions have left their mark on John's Gospel, and Saint Paul's letters also attempt to answer them.

65. *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*, 279.

66. Not only is this the essential content of the Gospel message concerning the *parousia*, but in an illuminating linguistic move Benedict also says that this spiritual dimension is the content of the Christian life: "The content of the Christian life, we said, is not predicting the future, but it is, on the one hand, the gift of the Holy Spirit and, on the other hand, the disciples' worldwide testimony to Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord." *Ibid.*, 286-87.

Yet *the essential content* of this answer can be gleaned from the accounts of the “Ascension” at the end of Luke’s Gospel and the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>67</sup>

How does Christ come to Christians today? The Gospel of John reveals that by going away Christ is able to come again with a new closeness and presence through the Holy Spirit.<sup>68</sup> In the following passages he spells this out at greater length and illustrates with a few examples:

Specific reference is made [in the Gospel of John] to a “coming” of the Father and the Son: it is an eschatology of the present that John has developed. It does not abandon the expectation of a definitive coming that will change the world, but it shows that the interim time is not empty: it is marked by the *adventus medius*, the middle coming, of which Bernard speaks. This anticipatory presence is an *essential element* in Christian eschatology, in Christian life . . . The “middle coming” takes place in a great variety of ways. The Lord comes through his word; he comes in the sacraments, especially in the most Holy Eucharist; he comes into my life through words or events.<sup>69</sup>

The idea of an *adventus medius* developed by St. Bernard is here identified as an “essential element” in eschatology and the concept of the *parousia*. Christ enters our lives every day, especially in the Eucharist.

We can see how this connection is developed at greater length by returning to Ratzinger’s *Eschatology* for a moment:

The cosmic imagery of the New Testament cannot be used as a source for the description of a future chain of cosmic events. All attempts of this kind are misplaced. Instead, these texts form part of a description of the mystery of the Parousia in the language of liturgical tradition . . . The Parousia is the highest intensification and fulfillment of the Liturgy. And the Liturgy is Parousia, an event taking place in our midst.<sup>70</sup>

Once again, Ratzinger denies that the New Testament has in its sights a literal description of how future events will unfold. However, he picks up on a point that many fail to consider in the whole *parousia* debate, namely that the Scriptures depict the Lord’s coming in the language of liturgy, not cosmology. “Every Eucharist is Parousia,” Ratzinger emphatically reasserts.<sup>71</sup> Thus the words “Come, Lord Jesus!”

67. *Ibid.*, 280 (emphasis added).

68. *Ibid.*, 283-84. Benedict refers here to the speech of Jesus narrated in John 14:25-31.

69. *Ibid.*, 291 (emphasis added).

70. *Eschatology*, 202-203.

71. *Ibid.*, 203. My aim here is not to develop Ratzinger’s argument in favor of this connection. For an accessible treatment of this, see Scott Hahn’s chapter “Come Again? The Real Presence as Parousia,” in *Catholic for a Reason III: Scripture and the Mystery of the Mass* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2004), 31-48. In connection with the *par-*

(Rev 22:20) can and should be prayed by everyone who is blessed to partake in the marriage supper of the Lamb (cf. Rev 19:7-9). To put it in Benedict's own words from one of his last catecheses on the subject of prayer, "Jesus repeats several times: 'Behold, I am coming soon' (Rev 22:7, 12). This affirmation does not only indicate the future prospect at the end of time but also that of the present: Jesus comes, he makes his dwelling place in those who believe in him and receive him."<sup>72</sup> To be sure, this explanation does not suffice on its own to account for all the Bible's problematic *parousia* passages, but it does provide another important angle from which to glimpse the cares and concerns of early Christians who lived in joyful hope of the Lord's coming.

### **Conclusion: Towards a Reconciliation of Past and Present Magisterial Teaching on the *Parousia***

Having advanced Ratzinger's approach towards reconciling problematic biblical texts concerning the *parousia*, I would like to conclude with a few considerations regarding the PBC decrees on the same subject. It is clear that in many ways the corpus of Ratzinger/Benedict XVI differs both in principle and in practice from the magisterial texts surveyed above. To be sure, the PBC decisions are not themselves dogmas, but they are concerned with upholding the dogma of the Second Coming in its full integrity and were issued with magisterial authority. How are they to be reconciled with the biblical text in light of modern exegesis and the teaching of today's Magisterium?

While the constraints of the present article do not make it possible to provide the full treatment this question deserves, for present purposes I would like simply to summarize a key elements in such a solution to the problems posed by the PBC decree described above—a solution which follows along the same lines advanced in the case of similar problems posed above by the text of Scripture. Both in Ratzinger's works and in the recent magisterial tradition one finds an emphasis on the need to situate dogmas within the Church's living and developing tradition. From the awareness that dogmas have a historical dimension follows the need to ascertain the precise context, meaning, intent, and content of dogmatic formulas. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI and the International Theological Commission refer to the latter variously as the core, principles, or permanently valid content of dogmas.<sup>73</sup> The key to discernment

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*ousia* and the Book of Revelation, see his *The Lamb's Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth* (New York: Doubleday, 1999). Also highly valuable is the excellent history of doctrine Hahn draws upon Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), especially 126-27 where he states: "The Eucharistic liturgy was not a compensation for the postponement of the parousia, but a way of celebrating the presence of one who had promised to return."

72. Benedict XVI, *A School of Prayer: The Saints Teach Us How to Pray* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 270.

73. "Without doubt a distinction must be made between the permanently valid content of dogmas and the form in which this is expressed." International Theological Commission, *The Interpretation of Dogma*, C.III.3. In C.III.5 the document proceeds to summarize Newman's seven criteria for discerning true from false developments of doctrine. Con-

here lies in grasping the precise question under consideration in a given magisterial statement.<sup>74</sup> Ascertaining the relevant question and answer within their context thus enables one to distinguish truths of Sacred Tradition which comprise the deposit of faith from human traditions which may be ancient yet stand in need of critique and are thus amenable to change over time.<sup>75</sup>

Applying this to the problematic PBC decrees discussed earlier in this article, what is needed therefore is a “critique” that distinguishes the specific pastoral decisions of the commission at the time from the essence of the message they wished to affirm. We have already seen that Ratzinger explicitly locates the core of Scripture’s *parousia* passages within their message concerning spiritual preparation, mission, and endurance in times of persecution. What, then, is the core or kernel of those troublesome PBC decrees on the subject of the Second Coming? Asking this ques-

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cerning how said dogmas are to be rendered accessible to believers today, the commission teaches that “the dogma must be stripped down to the original kernel to make it intelligible in a new culture. It is a problem involving all evangelization today, and especially where new factors affect the process of evangelization.” *Ibid.*, A.II.1 (emphasis added). Benedict employs similar language, underscoring the need to distinguish “permanent” principles from “contingent” practical forms of magisterial teaching which are subject to change. See Benedict XVI, Christmas Address to the Roman Curia (December 22, 2005). For an informative discussion of the historical condition that affects magisterial decisions, see the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s 1973 declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, 1973, 5.

74. International Theological Commission, *Theology Today*, 29: “Dogmas belong to the living and ongoing Apostolic Tradition. Theologians are aware of the difficulties that attend their interpretation. For example, it is necessary to understand the precise question under consideration in light of its historical context, and to discern how a dogma’s meaning and content are related to its formulation. Nevertheless, dogmas are sure points of reference for the Church’s faith and are used as such in theological reflection and argumentation.” The commission here cites its earlier document *The Interpretation of Dogma*, B.III.3 as well as John XXIII’s opening speech at Vatican II and the latter’s constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 62. See also the ITC’s earlier document cited in the above work, *The Interpretation of Dogma*, B.II.2, which describes the Second Vatican Council as having “presented the Church’s traditional doctrine on a much greater canvas” and, in so doing “accepted that dogma has an historical dimension.” The document adds that “a dogmatic definition is not only the end of a development but equally a new start.” *Ibid.*, C.III.1.
75. International Theological Commission, *Theology Today*, 31: “Vatican II distinguished between Tradition and those traditions that belong to particular periods of the Church’s history, or to particular regions and communities, such as religious orders or specific local churches... While criticism is not appropriate with reference to Apostolic Tradition itself, traditions must always be open to critique, so that the ‘continual reformation’ of which the Church has need can take place, and so that the Church can renew herself permanently on her one foundation, namely Jesus Christ. Such a critique seeks to verify whether a specific tradition does indeed express the faith of the Church in a particular place and time, and it seeks correspondingly to strengthen or correct it through contact with the living faith of all places and all times.” The ITC here cites the following texts from the Second Vatican Council: *Dei Verbum*, 8; *Lumen Gentium*, 13-14; *Unitatis Redintegratio* 6, 15, 17; *Ad Gentes* 22. See also *The Interpretation of Dogma*, C.II.2: “The discernment of spirits (1 Cor 12:10; 1 Thess 5:21; 1 Jn 4:1) is therefore an element in the entrance through the agency of the Holy Spirit into ‘the fullness of truth.’ The problem is to make a distinction between Tradition as received from the Lord (1 Cor 11:23) and the traditions of men (Mk 7:8; Col 2:8).”

tion necessarily entails another question: What was the primary interest of the PBC in drafting such documents, and of what lasting relevance are their findings which stand in such stark contrast with magisterial writings today?<sup>76</sup> While we cannot speak for the members of the 1915 PBC, a clear indication of their underlying intent is offered by none other than Ratzinger himself in a work written while he was head of the PBC. He provides a vivid comparison to illustrate:

The process of intellectual struggle over these issues that had become a necessary task can in a certain sense be compared with the similar process triggered by the Galileo affair. Until Galileo, it had seemed that the geocentric world picture was inextricably bound up with the revealed message of the Bible, and that champions of the heliocentric world picture were destroying the core of Revelation. It became necessary fully to reconceive the relationship between the outward form of presentation and the real message of the whole, and it required a gradual process before the criteria could be elaborated. Something analogous can be said with respect to history. *At first it seemed as if the ascription of the Pentateuch to Moses or of the Gospels to the four individuals whom tradition names as their authors were indispensable conditions of the trustworthiness of Scripture and, therefore, of the faith founded upon it.* Here, too, it was necessary for the territories to be re-surveyed, as it were; the basic relationship between faith and history needed to be re-thought. This sort of clarification could not be achieved overnight.<sup>77</sup>

In this passage Ratzinger sheds insight into the reason certain features of early PBC decrees stand “in need of correction.” Those who crafted the statements had assumed that the trustworthiness of Scripture—and thereby the faith itself—would be undermined if the Church entertained findings of modern scholarship that contradicted ancient traditions concerning such matters as the authorship and dating of biblical books. Applying Ratzinger’s principles to the case of the *parousia*, with the rising tide of modernism in the early twentieth century the commission had a

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76. In a section of its work *Unity of Faith and Theological Pluralism* (1972) entitled “Permanent Nature of Doctrinal Formulations,” the ITC states: “Dogmatic formulations must be considered as responses to precise questions, and it is in this sense that they remain always true. *Their permanent interest* depends on the lasting relevance of the questions with which they are concerned; at the same time it must not be forgotten that the successive questions that Christians ask themselves about the understanding of the divine word as well as already discovered solutions grow out of one another, so that today’s answers always presuppose in some way those of yesterday, although they cannot be reduced to them.” *Ibid.*, 10 (emphasis added). This document is cited twice in the ITC’s most recent work *Theology Today*.

77. Joseph Ratzinger, “Exegesis and Magisterium of the Church” in *Opening up the Scriptures: Joseph Ratzinger and the Foundations of Biblical Interpretation*, 134. Benedict XVI also reflected on this dimension of the Galileo affair in a poignant speech about Vatican II near the end of his pontificate. Benedict XVI, Address to the Parish Priests and Clergy of Rome (February 14, 2013).

reasonable fear of an exegetical slippery slope. In other words, perhaps they could see no way to reconcile the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture with an admission that at least some New Testament authors expected the Second Coming within their generation.

Having come to terms with the problems entailed in maintaining both of these seemingly incongruous positions (the inspiration of Scripture and the expectation of an imminent *parousia*), Ratzinger explains that some magisterial decisions are not intended to be definitive but rather “provisional” determinations of pastoral prudence. In keeping with the terminology employed in magisterial works above, he indicates that such statements have a kernel that remains valid throughout history as well as certain “particulars” or changeable accidental features.<sup>78</sup> Regarding what he calls “the anti-Modernist decisions of the then Biblical Commission,” Ratzinger makes two observations. On the one hand, “with respect to particular aspects of their content, they were superseded after having fulfilled their pastoral function in the situation of the time.”<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, he observes that “as warning calls against rash and superficial accommodations, they remain perfectly legitimate,” for “the anti-Modernist decisions of the Church performed the great service of saving her from foundering in the bourgeois-liberal world.”<sup>80</sup>

Thus from our privileged vantage point a century later, we can see that the principal goal or core of the PBC decrees did not consist in their assertions concerning such things as when and by whom particular biblical books were composed. Rather, the substance of what the Magisterium intended to convey at the time, that which remains true today, is the need to safeguard the authority of the Scriptures and—in the case of our topic in this article—the dogma of the *parousia*. ■

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78. These citations come from a document the then-Cardinal Ratzinger presented to the press upon the publication of the instruction *Donum Veritatis* on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian: “The text also presents the various forms of binding authority which correspond to the grades of the Magisterium. It states—perhaps for the first time with such candor—that there are magisterial decisions which cannot be the final word on a given matter as such but, despite the permanent value of their principles, are chiefly also a signal for pastoral prudence, a sort of provisional policy. Their kernel remains valid, but the particulars determined by circumstances can stand in need of correction.” Joseph Ratzinger, “On the ‘Instruction Concerning the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian,’” in *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Approaches to Understanding Its Role in Light of the Present Controversy*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 106. For the background to this statement see especially Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Veritatis*, 24.

79. Joseph Ratzinger, “On the ‘Instruction’ Concerning the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian,” 106.

80. *Ibid.*