

# WHAT THE SECOND COMING MEANS TO PEOPLE LIKE ME

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A few of you will remember Carl Poll, who served maybe three decades ago as bishop of the Palo Alto Ward. In 1967 his brother, historian Richard Poll, visited Palo Alto and gave a sacrament meeting talk exploring two distinct modes of LDS religious commitment and approaches to learning “the truth.” That talk was later published under the title “What the Church Means to People Like Me” and has proven immensely influential and beneficial.

I have no illusions that *this* talk will influence or benefit anyone outside this room, but I want to confessionally explore “What the Second Coming Means to People Like Me.” I know that, at least in this regard, at least a handful of you *are* “people like me,” and I pray that you will find comfort and maybe even a touch of inspiration in my words and thoughts. I hope those among us for whom my understanding is unfamiliar, or even discordant, will enjoy an opportunity to further cultivate the empathy and love that Jesus urged us to develop for our fellow disciples in longing.

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A sacrament meeting talk delivered Sept. 23, 2018 to the Menlo Park Ward of the Menlo Park, California Stake.

## Quick Summary of Doctrine

There may be some here for whom the Second Coming is a completely foreign concept. So a really quick recap: Since just after Jesus' crucifixion, which spoiled his Jewish followers' hope for an immediate glorious period of a Messianic reign of peace and righteousness, many Christians have believed, based on scripture, that someday Christ would come to earth again, not as a humble and nearly anonymous baby who would grow up to suffer to redeem us, but in a splendid, triumphant, universally visible advent heralded by at-least-metaphorical trumpets, putting an end to sin and transforming our strife-torn world into one of peace, unity, and beauty.

## My Struggles with this Doctrine

I want to begin by confessing that this is pretty nearly the last topic that I, left to my own devices, would have chosen to speak on. But when the bishopric did ask me to, it made me think a little more deeply about why I am uncomfortable with it and whether I wanted to stay that way. This led to some actual reflection, followed by even a tiny bit of (probably temporary) repentance, leaving me eager to explore it more deeply and share my feelings with you.

Now I promise that I'll get to more faith-affirming ideas soon enough, but I want to spend a few minutes exploring why I've always found this doctrine uncomfortable.

## Dangerous Abuse

I think my first problem might be that I've seen a lot of what I think of as dangerous "abuse" of the doctrine. As a youth growing up in the Church, I sat through lots of Sunday School and Young Men lessons on "the signs of the times," i.e., world events that were supposed to herald the Second Coming. The earth would be "rolled up like a scroll," whatever

that meant.<sup>1</sup> The moon would be turned to blood. There would be wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes in diverse places, etc., etc. I hated those lessons. They felt like they were crafted either to scare us or to find something exciting to talk about with teenagers who couldn't sense the excitement in the actual message of the gospel. Cheap thrills. To me, they distracted from a gospel that was supposed to address both our inner life, calling us to repentance, and our outer life, calling us to service. And fascination with destruction and with cataclysmic events seemed indecent to me. (I should allow here that I sense that the Church's emphasis on the Second Coming has decreased a whole lot over the course of my life.)

Next, embracing this doctrine risks discounting the importance of our stewardship of the earth. As Bob Marley put it, "Most people think great god will come from the skies / Take away everything and make everybody feel . . ." well, let's just say "happy." If Christ is coming soon and fundamentally transforming life on earth into some kind of paradise, we don't need to do anything about overpopulation, about resource depletion, about global climate change, about rainforest or coral reef destruction, about nuclear proliferation, or about pretty much anything else. I may be lacking a certain kind of faith, but given how long the promised divine intervention has been delayed so far, I find such escapist or denialist thinking, which can sometimes even degenerate into a thinly veiled Schadenfreude at political or economic chaos, really irresponsible and dangerous.

The final point in my list of the dangers of too great a fascination with the Second Coming is the prepper movement within the Church. In recent years Church leaders have felt the need to warn members against spending their time and spiritual energy on food storage and other forms of preparedness against "the destruction that will surely

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1. See Isaiah 34:4 and Revelation 6:14.

come.”<sup>2</sup> I’m reliably informed of people who tune in to general conference broadcasts listening only for hints from one talk or another that “the end is near” and miss all the other messages the Lord may actually be trying to send us.

### The “Scientific Mindset”

I think my second broad problem with the idea of the Second Coming is the fact that the events it predicts are so very far from how things normally seem to go. I’m not a highly trained geologist or physicist like some of my friends, but I recognize that I was either born with or have imbibed much of the general rationalist/scientific spirit of our age. If I understand correctly, one of the undergirding assumptions of much of physical science is that the way things work now is pretty much the way they’ve always worked. The half-life of radioactive isotopes has been constant for billions of years. The amount of water on the earth has remained pretty much constant. And so on.

Given this strong naturalistic prejudice, it is more than a little bit jarring to encounter a teaching that posits that Christ will come to Earth again, descending out of heaven, surrounded by angels (and, in Mormonism, the members of “Enoch’s band”<sup>3</sup>), that “all flesh shall see it together,”<sup>4</sup> that strife and enmity will be no more, and that “all men from sin will cease and will live in love and peace.”<sup>5</sup>

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2. A slight paraphrase of Helaman 13:6. One example of such a general conference talk is Bruce R. McConkie, “Stand Independent above All Other Creatures,” Apr. 1979, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1979/04/stand-independent-above-all-other-creatures?lang=eng>.

3. “Let Zion in Her Beauty Rise,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 41

4. Isaiah 40:5.

5. “Come, Ye Children of the Lord,” *Hymns*, no. 58.

## The Faith-Affirming Perspective

So, given all of that, what have I felt that makes me eager to share my hopes for the Second Coming with you? Let me mention in passing, and by way of gentle advice, that I have often found it spiritually fruitful to reexamine previous understandings and feelings, especially negative ones. Now, let's start with the fact that I have a pretty great respect for the spiritual and temporal experiences of the early members of our faith, and I started thinking about the role that *their* belief in the Second Coming played in the life of the early Church. Today many of us think of the appropriate gravitational center of our religious or spiritual life as something like “working to develop a richer personal relationship with our Heavenly Father or with Jesus.” My own impression is that that idea would have sounded pretty foreign to early Church members. My understanding of the self-identified mission of the early Saints is that they were striving instead to build Zion: a society of righteousness, devotion, unity, and spiritual and temporal equality that would be genuinely receptive to the Lord when he comes again—a “kingdom” that would serve as a model to other kingdoms and would welcome Jesus as King of kings.

For many decades this concrete utopian vision unified an extremely diverse set of frontierspeople, farmers, scholars, and immigrants, inspiring baffling levels of sacrifice and giving a transcendent meaning to their lives and struggles. This dynamic vision made the work of the kingdom urgent and motivating and brought most aspects of life together under that banner. Today, from a 150-year remove, *I miss that*. In my best hours I want us to love each other and to be equal in both earthly and heavenly things. I want us to be inspired by a goal more universal and godly than our individual or familial perfection.

And, despite my inner pull toward skepticism, I long for—I ache for—a world-transforming divine intervention that will raise our sights, our collective aspirations, above the amassing of wealth and the

cultivation of status—leading us to a world where our constant understanding of each other is as brothers and sisters.

### Preparation

Let me talk for a minute about preparation. The scriptures, including at least one famous parable of Jesus, do encourage us to be vigilant in our preparation for the coming of the bridegroom.

But let's reflect on what real preparation consists of. The early Latter-day Saints tried to prepare by building the City of God. Their preparation was collective, societal. I'm grateful for the ways the Church encourages this—urging us to minister to each other. And I desire to be better at that.

A quick but hopefully appetizing aside: The word “minister” is closely related to “minestrone.” So, maybe we could be making each other more tasty soups. Less whimsically, I will remind you that early Christian services were held around literal meals that they shared together, perhaps in anticipation of the great wedding feast.

We are encouraged to feed each other both spiritually, and we often do an astounding and inspiring job of this in the lessons and talks we prepare for each other, and physically, helping each other move and caring for kids. But I feel like we (and especially I) still have a really long way to go in building an alternate society that is not seduced by worldly notions of value and success but embodies instead Jesus' values, one in which he'd be genuinely at home.

What about personal preparation? In Primary we have a lovely song “When He Comes Again.” The first verse asks whether the Second Coming will be in spring or winter, whether angels will sing, whether a special star will shine. As a kid, I confess I wondered no such things, and I didn't feel it would be honest to myself to even sing that verse. But I was riveted by the second verse. “I wonder, when he comes again / Will I be ready there / To look upon his loving face / And join with him

in prayer?”<sup>6</sup> *That’s* the preparation that makes sense to me—to become a person who would feel joy in his presence and share prayers with him, as well as to cultivate an ear that will “know his voice.”<sup>7</sup>

### The “Believing Mindset”

Now I want to respond to the “scientific” self that I talked about earlier. This is probably the most important part of this talk, and it may be the hardest to convey.

Let me simply lay out for you, my sisters and brothers, my own genuine experience. I have experienced powerful, beautiful, reassuring, sometimes challenging, and astonishingly explicit revelatory responses to prayer. I have felt divine power and inspiration flowing as I’ve given priesthood blessings or ordained people to the priesthood. When I have given especially good Sunday School lessons or talks, I have burned with the feeling that I’ve truly acted as an instrument of the Lord, partially fulfilling the “measure of my creation”: feeling and feeding his presence in the lives and hearts of my brothers and sisters. In short, having experienced divinity in my life, I believe in God. And, to paraphrase Joseph Smith, I neither desire nor dare to deny any of that.

So I can and do testify that it is possible—not only possible, but edifying, maybe even exalting—to believe both ways: to experience within one undivided but sufficiently quickened soul/mind/psyche both the rationality that invites and explores questions and the faith that experiences God in this world.

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6. “When He Comes Again,” *Children’s Songbook* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 82.

7. John 10:4.

I want to repeat for you something that a dear friend who knows me well shared about me. I hope you will hear this in a spirit of charity and embracing. My friend said: “I know, Kim, that you don’t actually believe that the city of Enoch was taken into heaven—but somehow, at the same time, you believe it more deeply than anyone I’ve ever known.” I’ve tried to let this insightful observation sink into my self-understanding.

Although I am weak and often irresolute, in my heart of hearts, *that*, the city of Enoch, is *my* city. Those are my people—they are the people whom, along with Joseph Smith, Immanuel Kant, and Eleanor Roosevelt, I want to meet and get to know after this life. The longing for these people colors my entire life and structures my worldview at my best. That’s who I am, and who I’m deeply grateful to be.

So maybe a bit of advice for myself and some others: Without worrying too much about whether they are historically or literally true, allow our stories to work their divine, poetic magic in your soul. Whether it’s the city of Enoch, the temple ceremony, the Second Coming, the lighting of stones by the finger of the Lord, or the marriage supper of the Lamb, allow the universality of their symbolism to evoke in you visions of a universal community and an eternal divine plan in which the angels and their allies will, through humility and love, emerge singing triumphal songs of glory and joy.

### Maranatha

We know that the original followers of Jesus thought of themselves as trying to realize three cardinal virtues: faith, hope, and love. Students of the New Testament believe they had watchwords for the first two of these. Along with their confession of faith, namely “Jesus is Lord!,” they had a confession of hope, the Aramaic phrase *Maranatha*, which means “The Lord is coming,” or perhaps more evocatively, “Come, Lord.”

Come, and bring, Jesus, that feast of love to which we are all invited.



I want (and choose to try) to live in that hope. So I join now with Christians of all ages in voicing my hope and longing in the words of Revelation — “Come, Lord Jesus.”

And I invite you all now to join in that chorus, raising our voices together to implore “Come, O thou King of Kings! We’ve waited long for thee.”<sup>8</sup>

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8. “Come, O Thou King of Kings,” *Hymns*, no. 59. The organ started immediately as I spoke the words of this hymn at the end of my talk, and I directed the congregation in singing it as the closing hymn.

KIM MCCALL {mccall.kim@gmail.com} studied philosophy (BA) and computer science (MS) at Stanford University. His work in computing ranged from Xerox Palo Alto Research Center to Box, Inc. He sings in an excellent chorus and enjoys dance, food, and teaching music to kids. It is hard to talk with him for long without the Church coming up.