

THE PREEMINENT SIGN OF THE LORD'S COMING: THE MANIFESTATION OF THE BODY OF CHRIST

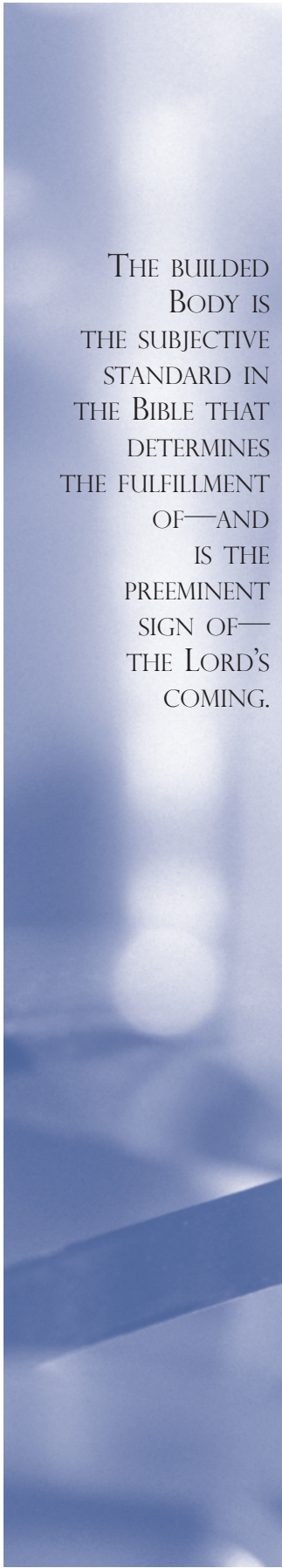
BY JOHN PESTER

The timing of the coming of the Lord, coincident with the coming of the kingdom at the consummation of the age, was a subject of great interest to the disciples in the New Testament, and it continues to be of interest to Christians today. This interest is primarily focused on the outward fulfillment of prophetic events, such as the restoration of the nation of Israel,¹ the emergence of a European confederation,² the rise of Gog and Magog,³ the rebuilding of the Third Temple,⁴ and the ascent of a powerful, Satan-inspired world leader.⁵ In *The Late Great Planet Earth* Hal Lindsey reiterates this chain of prophetic events prior to the Lord's coming, saying, "Along with the revival of Israel and the return of the dispersed Jews, the rise of Russia, the formation of the Arab confederacy, China is helping to shape the Orient into its pattern of prophecy. History seems to be headed for its climactic hour" (87).

The fascination with and looking for the fulfillment of "climactic" prophetic signs by many Christians today are a continuation of the same traits that were exhibited by the disciples during the earthly ministry of Christ in Matthew 24:3: "On the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, Tell us, When will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming and of the consummation of the age?" The use of the singular word *sign* rather than *signs* stresses their interest in knowing the preeminent sign. In verses 4 through 7 the Lord answered, listing events related to His coming, including many being led astray by those saying, "I am the Christ"; the hearing of wars and rumors of wars; the rising up of nation against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; and the occurrence of famines and earthquakes in various places. In verses 9 through 12 the Lord spoke not of His coming but of further impact from the environment in relation to the preaching of the gospel, saying that the disciples would be delivered up to tribulation, killed, and hated by all the nations because of His name, with many being delivered up and hated by one another and with the love of many growing cold. In verse 14 the Lord's response is focused on events related to the preaching of a building gospel, not to His coming: "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole inhabited earth for a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come."

After the resurrection this fascination with prophetic signs has not abated among the Lord's past and present disciples as seen in Acts 1:6: "The ones who came together asked Him, saying, Lord, are You at this time restoring the kingdom to Israel?" Knowing that the restoration of the kingdom would be coincident with His coming, the Lord said, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has set by His own authority" (v. 7). In verse 8 He explicitly focused on the disciples' being His witnesses: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

That only the Father knows the time of the Lord's coming means that expending much energy on pursuits related to searching for the fulfillment of prophetic signs, even of ones mentioned



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in the Bible, is entirely futile. Trying to determine an exact or even an approximate date of the Lord's coming produces needless speculation and "self-assured pontification" designed to satisfy itching ears (2 Tim. 4:3); these tendencies are noted by Alan S. Bandy and Benjamin L. Merkle in *Understanding Prophecy*: "[A conversation about prophecy] usually dissipates as the inquirer's eyes dart quickly in search of an exit, but at other times it evokes more curiosity coupled with some self-assured pontification regarding current events and the rapture" (17). These self-assured pontifications⁶ often fall into the category of being one's own private interpretation, to which no prophecy of Scripture is subject (2 Pet. 1:20).

In *The Final Countdown* Charles C. Ryrie links the fascination with the objective fulfillment of outward prophetic signs to

the unstable political climate worldwide [that] also generates an interest in prophecy. Government leaders demonstrate all too often that they do not have the answers. Many seem to realize more than ever today that the Bible has something reliable to say about tomorrow's headlines. And, in fact, it is the only accurate source of information about the future. (9)

Despite Ryrie's acknowledgment of the Bible, rather than current headlines, as the standard for prophetic interpretation, he misses the subjective standard in the Bible that determines the fulfillment of—and is the preeminent sign of—the Lord's coming—the manifestation of the builded Body. This standard can be garnered from the Lord's response in Acts 1:7-8 to the disciples' question in Acts 1:6, when He spoke of the disciples' not knowing the times or seasons that the Father has set and of the disciples' being witnesses.

The "times or seasons" selected by the Father is associated with the preaching of the gospel that grafts unbelieving Gentiles into the cultivated olive tree—the corporate Christ—through the hearing of faith (Rom. 11:7; 10:14-15, 17). The sent ones, those with beautiful feet who announce the good things of the gospel in verse 15, are those who have received power from the Holy Spirit to be witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth in Acts 1:8, and "the uttermost part of the earth" corresponds to "the whole inhabited earth" in Matthew 24:14. All the destinations in these two verses—Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and the whole inhabited earth—are associated with geographic boundaries for the preaching of the gospel.

The Preeminent Sign Being Spiritual Not Material: Building before Coming

An obsessive focus on the unfolding of material signs and not on the attainment of the one preeminent sign—the manifestation of the Body of Christ—actually delays the Lord's coming, because the Lord will not come for a Body that has not been built up or a bride who has not been adorned. Spiritual building and adornment precede coming. This point is clearly revealed in a set of five crucial and well-known New Testament passages: 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; Ephesians 2:20-22; Ephesians 4:11-16; Colossians 2:6-7, and Revelation 21:2, 9-10, and 19. These passages confirm the necessity of building before the Lord's coming.

First Corinthians 3:10-15: Building before the Fire of Judgment at the Day of the Lord's Coming

In one of the most disconcerting passages related to a believer's salvation, which many see as suggesting that believers can lose their salvation, 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 actually focuses on the building work of a believer prior to the coming of the Lord, whether or not it is done with proper materials—the Triune God as gold, silver, and precious stones—or with elements of the natural man—wood, grass, and stubble:

According to the grace of God given to me, as a wise master *builder* I have laid a foundation, and another *builds* upon it. But let each man take heed how he *builds* upon it. For another foundation no one is able to lay besides that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. But if anyone *builds* upon the foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, grass, stubble, the work of

each will become manifest; *for the day will declare it*, because it is revealed by fire, and the fire itself will prove each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has *built* upon the foundation remains, he will receive a reward; if anyone's work is consumed, he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (emphasis added)

The salvation spoken of here with the word *saved* refers to dispensational punishment: "He himself will be saved, yet so as through fire." Those who do not need to pass through this purifying punishment receive a dispensational reward—the enjoyment of the millennial kingdom, which begins with the coming of the Lord.⁷ God's eternal salvation is not in question in this passage; salvation is eternally received when one believes into the Son: "He who has the Son has the life" (1 John 5:12). A believer cannot be snatched out of the Son's hand: "I give to them eternal life, and they shall by no means perish forever, and no one shall snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:28). Neither can a believer be snatched out of the Father's hand: "My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of My Father's hand" (v. 29). The word *saved* points to the Lord's determination of the value of the building work done by a believer before the day of the Lord's coming.

The seriousness of this valuation can be seen in the fact that the word *build* or a variation of it is used five times in this passage, whereas there is only one reference to the coming of the Lord. Paul's work along with wisdom made him a wise master builder. Others build upon the foundation that Paul laid, but they need to take heed how they build upon it. The value of a building work depends on the use of proper materials—the Triune God as gold (the Father), silver (the Son), and precious stones (the Spirit). If these materials are used, one's building work will be rewarded and remain. This building is carried out before the coming of the Lord. Thus, the manifestation of the Body through building is of preeminent importance.

Ephesians 2:20-22: Building in the Church Age before the Lord's Coming

Building takes place in the church age prior to the Lord's coming at the end of the church age. The present church age is devoted to building a spiritual manifestation of the Body. This can be seen in Ephesians 2:20-22:

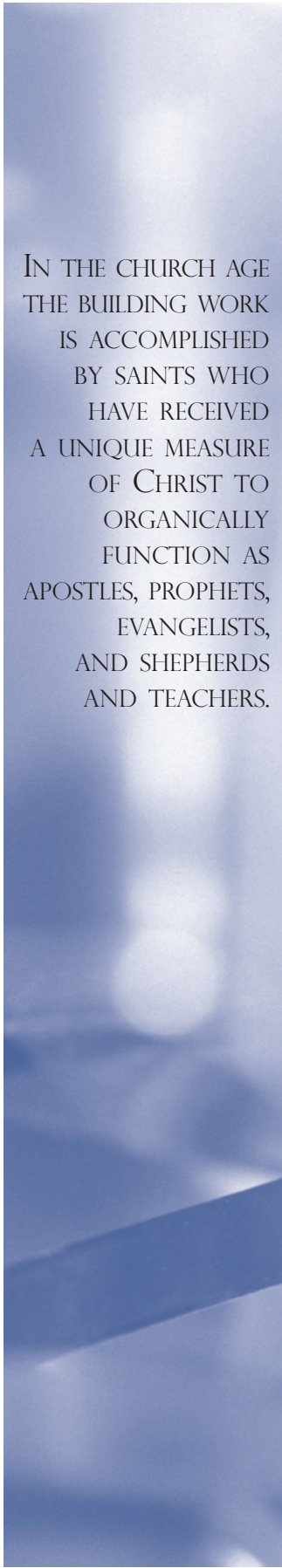
Being *built* upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone; in whom all the *building*, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being *built* together into a dwelling place of God in spirit. (emphasis added)

The phrases *being built upon the foundation*, *being fitted together*, and *being built together*, with the repeated use of the word *being*, speak of a present and ongoing spiritual process that occurs in our human spirit, which is indwelt by the Spirit of God upon regeneration. Witness Lee expands on this, writing,

Verse 21 says that the holy temple is in the Lord, and verse 22, that the dwelling place of God is in spirit. This indicates that the Lord is one with our spirit and that our spirit is one with the Lord. To be in our spirit actually is to be in the Lord. Also, to be in the Lord is to be in the spirit. He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit (1 Cor. 6:17). We simply cannot separate our spirit from the Lord. Therefore, our spirit is the place where the building of the church is. The building is not in our mind, emotion, soul, or heart. It is absolutely a matter in our spirit. (*Life-study of Ephesians* 238)

At the moment of our believing, our deadened human spirit was enlivened with the life of God by being born of the Spirit (Eph. 2:1, 5; John 3:6). God's salvific work in His economy then extends to the other two parts of our tripartite being—soul and body (1 Thes. 5:23)—but the principal focus of His work, including the building of the Body and, hence, its manifestation as the preeminent sign of the coming of the Lord, remains with the Spirit in our spirit.

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Ephesians 2:17 says, “Coming, He announced peace as the gospel to you who were far off, and peace to those who were near.” “This is the coming of Christ as the Spirit to preach peace as the gospel, which peace He made through His cross” (Lee, *Recovery Version*, v. 17, note 1). The preaching of peace as the gospel by Christ initiates a practical expression of the Body on the earth in the church age, which can manifest the preeminent sign of the Lord’s coming through our diligence “to keep the oneness of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace” (4:3) and our pursuing “the things of peace and the things for building up one another” (Rom. 14:19).

Ephesians 4:11-16: Building through the Work of the Ministry before the Lord’s Coming

In the church age the building work is accomplished by saints who have received a unique measure of Christ to organically function as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers (Eph. 4:11). These gifts to the Body perfect the saints to carry out a further work of ministry that builds up the Body (vv. 8, 12). As they carry out this ministering work, the saints are subject to being inundated with winds of teaching in the sleight of men, which teachings are designed in craftiness with a view to a system of error (v. 14). Even though the being-perfected saints can be little children tossed by waves, they can still grow up into Him in all things by holding to truth in love (vv. 14-15). These points, which are related to building through the work of the ministry in the present church age prior to the Lord’s coming, are clearly spoken of in verses 11 through 16:

He Himself gave some as apostles and some as prophets and some as evangelists and some as shepherds and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints unto the work of the ministry, unto the *building up* of the Body of Christ, until we all arrive at the oneness of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, at a full-grown man, at the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, that we may be no longer little children tossed by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching in the sleight of men, in craftiness with a view to a system of error, but holding to truth in love, we may grow up into Him in all things, who is the Head, Christ, out from whom all the Body, being joined together and being knit together through every joint of the rich supply and through the operation in the measure of each one part, causes the growth of the Body unto the *building up* of itself in love. (emphasis added)

The work of the ministry in the church age builds up the Body of Christ through its ability to engender an arrival at the oneness of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, at a full-grown man who manifests the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ at least in miniature (v. 13).⁸ This building is based and dependent upon love, a love that flows from the love of God and from God, whose divine nature is love itself (1 John 4:16). An application of a building love must be demonstrated in the present age in order for the Father to happily and definitively set a time for the coming of the Lord. That the word *being* is used twice in Ephesians 4:16 again speaks of a present and ongoing spiritual building process that occurs in our human spirit indwelt by God the Spirit.

Colossians 2:6-7: Building in the Believer’s Walk before the Lord’s Coming

Most Christians think that the Lord is seeking ethical adjustments in their daily walk in order to be well pleasing to Him, and thus, they endeavor to modify their outward behavior through self-effort and self-improvement, but they fail utterly and remain in a wretched walk (Rom. 7:24). The notion that there is a need for ethical adjustment in order to be well pleasing to the Lord is based on a failure to see that the true source of our ordained walk should be Christ, Jesus the Lord, in whom we have been organically rooted so that we can be organically built up to manifest the Body: “As therefore you have received the Christ, Jesus the Lord, walk in Him, having been rooted and being *built up* in Him, and being established in the faith even as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (Col. 2:6-7, emphasis added). A Christian’s walk must be sourced in the organic life of Christ, as indicated by the word *rooted*. This rooted life then builds up and manifests a living that is properly sourced in the divine life. The ongoing process of being rooted and built up is

an extension of our initial receiving of the Spirit of the glorified Jesus, who was revealed at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles in John 7 when

Jesus stood and cried out, saying, If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes into Me, as the Scripture said, out of his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water. But this He said concerning the Spirit, whom those who believed into Him were about to receive; for the Spirit was not yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified. (vv. 37-39)

With the Body's initial receiving of the Spirit through Christ's breathing of the Spirit into the disciples on the day of His resurrection (20:22), the fullness of Christ was imparted into the Body as grace upon grace, which then supplies the organic life of Christ that is needed for a believer's walk (1:16). Repentant sinners receive the supplying Spirit when they believe through the hearing of faith (Acts 19:2; Gal. 3:2, 5), and thus, it is foolishness for new believers to seek perfection through the flesh with its natural inclination toward ethical adjustment (v. 3). It is the supplying Spirit who roots and builds up the Body, whose manifestation then becomes the preeminent sign of the Lord's coming.

Revelation 21:2, 9-10, 19: Building through Bridal Adornment before the Lord's Coming

In the divine economy, as revealed in the Bible, the bride, the wife, of Christ is built. She is built with the resurrection life of Christ. This life-adorned bride then becomes the holy city, New Jerusalem: "One of the seven angels...came and spoke with me, saying, Come here; I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb. And he carried me away in spirit onto a great and high mountain and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Rev. 21:9-10). John "saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, *prepared* as a bride *adorned* for her husband" (v. 2, emphasis added): "The foundations of the wall of the city were *adorned* with every precious stone" (v. 19, emphasis added). Both the preparation and adornment of the bride involve a building work.

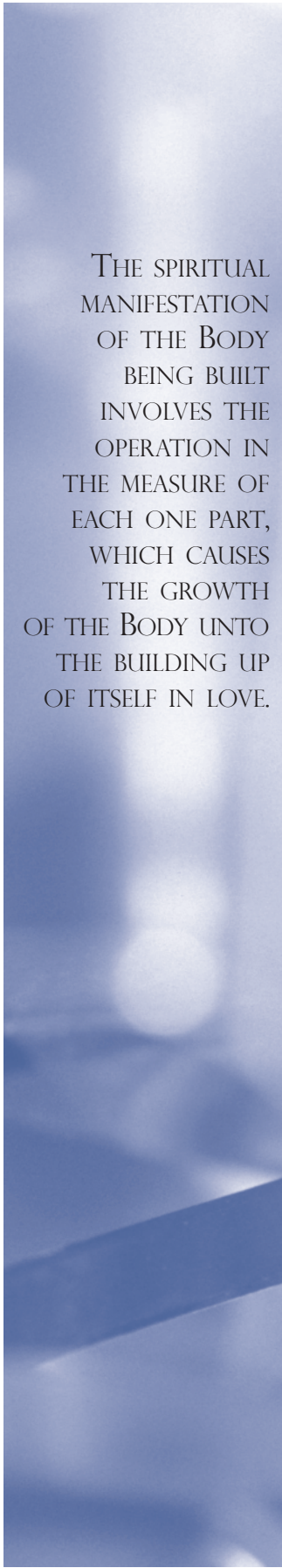
The holy city is adorned with precious materials derived from and structured with the divine life and nature of the Triune God mingled with the life and nature of redeemed humanity. All of the city's structural features—a great and high wall, twelve gates with the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel, and twelve foundations with twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (vv. 12-21)—reflect the basic elements of a building, which also has the additional status of being a loving counterpart of Christ as bride and wife. The account in Genesis 2:18-22 typifies the formation of the bride as Christ's loving counterpart:

Jehovah God said, It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper as his counterpart...And Jehovah God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh in its place. And Jehovah God *built* the rib, which He had taken from the man, into a woman and brought her to the man. (emphasis added)

Eve was formed when God caused Adam to sleep, a type of Christ's death. In the Lord's crucifixion none of His bones was broken, signifying His unbreakable resurrection life, which produces and builds the church as His bridal counterpart (John 19:36; cf. 1 Pet. 1:3). Witness Lee expounds on the scriptural fulfillment of this type:

In the Scripture the first mention of a bone is in Gen. 2:21-23; there it was a rib taken out of Adam for the producing and building of Eve as a match for Adam. Eve was a type of the church, which is produced and built with the Lord's resurrection life released out of Him. Hence, the bone is a symbol, a figure, of the Lord's resurrection life, which nothing can break. The Lord's side was pierced, but not one of His bones was broken. This signifies that although the Lord's physical life was terminated, His resurrection life, the very divine life, could not be hurt or damaged by anything. This is the life with which the church is produced and built; it is also the eternal life, which we have obtained by believing into Him ([John] 3:36). (Lee, *Recovery Version*, John 19:36, note 2)

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The adorning of the bride occurs in the church age, prior to the coming of the Lord, through the believers' constitution with the unsearchable riches of Christ that were received through the preaching of the gospel⁹: "To me, less than the least of all saints, was this grace given to announce to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel" (Eph. 3:8). This constitution for adornment should be expressed outwardly in our body: "Similarly, that women adorn themselves in proper clothing with modesty and sobriety, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly clothing" (1 Tim. 2:9). The outward, physical adornment of our body should be an extension of an inward, spiritual adornment in the hidden man of the heart: "Let your adorning not be the outward plaiting of hair and putting on of gold or clothing with garments, but the hidden man of the heart in the incorruptible adornment of a meek and quiet spirit, which is very costly in the sight of God. For in this manner formerly the holy women also, who hoped in God, adorned themselves" (1 Pet. 3:3-5). All expressions of adornment in the believers' normal living in the church prepare the church to genuinely manifest the Body through the tripartite members of the Body. This preparation, this building, occurs before the coming of the Lord, making it part of the preeminent sign of the Lord's coming—the manifestation of the Body of Christ.

Four Spiritual Indicators of the Body Being Built

The spiritual manifestation of the Body being built involves the operation in the measure of each one part, which causes the growth of the Body unto the building up of itself in love (Eph. 4:16). A limited experiential operation in the measure of each one part implies a nascent manifestation of the Body, but it is still difficult for believers to internalize a subjective realization of the Body. For most Christians the growth of the Body unto the building up of itself in love is only a teaching and not an experience. However, building involves more than just a teaching, especially when we pay attention to four important biblical indicators of building: loving one another, receiving one another, shepherding one another, and dispensing grace to one another.

Loving One Another

The Body builds itself up through practical demonstrations of love, which, more specially, is the love of the indwelling Triune God: "We know and have believed the love which God has in us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him" (1 John 4:16). Therefore, "let us love one another, because love is of God, and everyone who loves has been begotten of God and knows God" (v. 7). The genuine realization of God's building love involves love that is warm: "Love one another warmly in brotherly love; take the lead in showing honor one to another" (Rom. 12:10); love that is unfeigned and fervent: "Since you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth unto unfeigned brotherly love, love one another from a pure heart fervently" (1 Pet. 1:22); and love that is the same toward all members, making no distinctions based on personal preferences: "Make my joy full, that you think the same thing, having the same love, joined in soul, thinking the one thing" (Phil. 2:2).

If we avoid contact with and are cold toward certain saints because of unforgiven offenses, we are lacking in love, and we should be more conscious of this hindrance to the building. If we make false public displays of our love, our pretense is often apparent, and we should be more conscious of this hindrance to the building. If we choose to fellowship only with believers whose personalities match our personality, our love is unbalanced, and we should be more conscious of this hindrance to the building. We cannot adjust our tendencies toward coldness, pretense, and distinctions through self-effort even when the Lord makes us more conscious of them; we still need to turn to the Lord in our mingled spirit and receive the Lord's inward supply of grace under the shining of His light: "Exercise yourself unto godliness" (1 Tim. 4:7). We all need to be perfected in our love so that our consciousness of the value of every member of the Body can increase organically: "Finally, brothers, rejoice, be perfected, be comforted, think the same thing, be at peace; and the

God of love and peace will be with you” (2 Cor. 13:11). This increase is a positive subjective indicator of the manifestation of the building of the Body.

Receiving One Another

Closely related to loving one another is the receiving of one another. In an atmosphere of love, the believers who are more mature in the experience of the divine life, that is, who are more rooted and grounded in Christ, see value in every member of the Body and also see the level of their growth but do not seek to outwardly adjust their weak considerations and practices; rather, these more mature ones receive them as they are, knowing that God has received them and will make them able to more firmly stand in the faith:

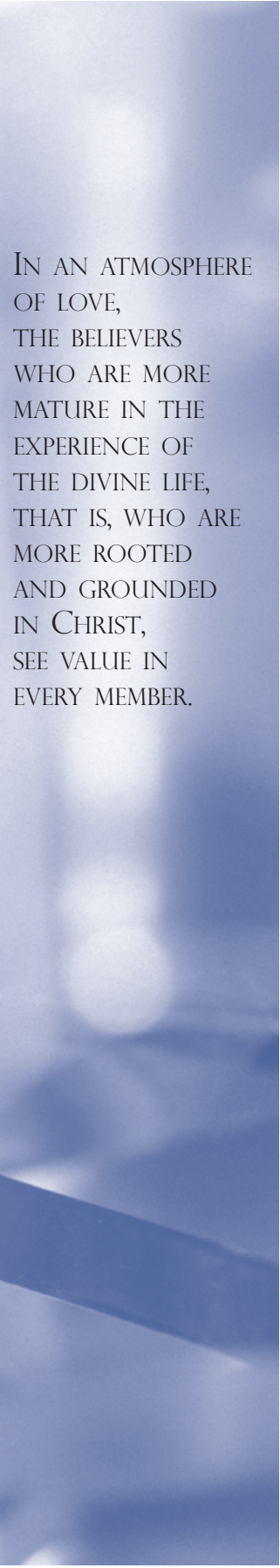
Now him who is weak in faith receive, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his considerations. One believes that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables. He who eats, let him not despise him who does not eat; and he who does not eat, let him not judge him who eats, for God has received him. Who are you who judge another's household servant? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will be made to stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (Rom. 14:1-4)

All effective adjustments come from the inner operation of the divine life in an atmosphere of love. Outside such an atmosphere, there is only despising, judging, and an unwillingness to allow one who is weaker in the faith to “be fully persuaded in his own mind” (v. 5). This puts a stumbling block or cause of falling before the brother (v. 13). Further, any such action or attitude wounds and destroys the brother, because the despising and judging one is no longer walking according to love (v. 15), and without love, there is no organic work of building or manifestation of the Body: “So then let us pursue the things of peace and the things for building up one another. Do not break down the work of God for the sake of food” (vv. 19-20). Receiving produces building; the work of God is a building work. The tendency to attempt to adjust others to conform to one's own views is counterproductive to the building up of the Body, and it is easily detected by the presence of a judgmental attitude. However, a general attitude of acceptance and a confidence in the Lord's ability to make a believer stand is a positive subjective indicator of the manifestation of the building of the Body.


Shepherding One Another

Closely related to loving one another and receiving one another is the shepherding of one another. True and effective shepherding is based on an intimate concern. “In taking care of children, what is most important is not knowledge or ability—it is an intimate concern. The same is true in taking care of churches or in shepherding the saints. What is needed is the intimate concern of a ministering life” (Lee, *Life-study of 2 Corinthians* 382). The Lord demonstrated such an intimate concern when He came to a discouraged Peter on the shore following His resurrection; “He said to him again a second time, Simon, son of John, do you love Me? He said to Him, Yes, Lord, You know that I love You. He said to him, Shepherd My sheep” (John 21:16). The Lord could have spoken of many other matters, such as preaching the gospel or spreading the truths of the faith, but His heart was focused on shepherding the sheep who had heard His voice and followed Him: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (10:27).

In order to carry out the care prompted by an intimate concern, there is a need to lay down one's soul-life, following the pattern of the Lord: “I am the good Shepherd; the good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep” (v. 11). The primary responsibility placed upon the overseers of the church by the Holy Spirit is to “shepherd the church of God, which He obtained through His own blood” (Acts 20:28). This shepherding should occur “not under compulsion but willingly, according to God; not by seeking gain through base means



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but eagerly" (1 Pet. 5:2). Peter clearly internalized the Lord's word concerning shepherding and the Spirit's placement of shepherds in the church; he relied upon the Lord as the Shepherd and Overseer of souls (2:25). Active and thoughtful shepherding is a positive subjective indicator of the manifestation of the building of the church as the Body.

Dispensing Grace to One Another

Closely related to loving, receiving, and shepherding one another is the dispensing of grace to one another. No corrupt word should proceed out of our mouth, "but only that which is good for building up, according to the need, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Eph. 4:29). Words of grace should be spoken at all times but especially during the meetings of the church: "What then, brothers? Whenever you come together, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up" (1 Cor. 14:26). Dispensing grace is an act of love, a confirmation of receiving, and an application of shepherding. Such a robust dispensing is a positive subjective indicator of the manifestation of the building of the Body.

Reaching a Spiritual Indicator of the Building of the Body

Watchman Nee says that the fulfillment of Ephesians 4:11-16 would be the most difficult truth to manifest in the church age:

When I was in England, Brother T. Austin-Sparks asked me what chapter in the Bible is the hardest to fulfill. I told him that the hardest chapter should be Ephesians 4 on the perfecting of the saints. After reading that chapter, I am very concerned that this chapter will not be fulfilled. I am confident about the other chapters. But I do not as yet have the confidence about this chapter. For the past two thousand years Ephesians 4 has not yet been fulfilled. According to the present condition, I am afraid that given two thousand more years, this chapter will still not be fulfilled. If this is the case, humanly speaking, the Lord will not be able to come back. It is true that the church is in desolation outwardly. But the question today is whether or not there is a group of people who will stand on God's side to receive God's riches and who will pay the price to appropriate these riches. (174-175)

Advancing toward the Milestone of Building the Body

In the paragraph immediately before the paragraph quoted above, Nee does, nevertheless, provide some hope for the fulfillment of Ephesians 4:11-16, noting that

Acts does not have an ending, because we are still continuing the book of Acts. The gospel has not been thoroughly preached, and the Lord has not come back yet. Today we are still writing Acts. Ephesians 2 speaks of the dwelling place of God. Ephesians 4 speaks of the perfecting of the saints by the gifts, in order to arrive at the oneness of the faith and the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ unto the building up of the Body in love. Ephesians 5 speaks of the church being without spot, wrinkle, blame, and reproach, and being fully glorious. These are conditions that have not been attained yet. We are still in the continuation of the recovery of the church. (174)

Advancing toward the Fulfillment of Ephesians 4:11-16

When I began this article, I was concerned about my ability to move beyond a mere repetition of the truth contained in Ephesians 4:11-16 in order to make the reality of building more accessible and applicable. In my despair I received, sovereignly, an email from a fellow co-worker who was sent to Germany to serve the horde of refugees coming from the Ukraine. Her service also incorporated the organic function of a prophet speaking for God, an evangelist preaching the gospel, a shepherd caring for and feeding the common and spiritual needs of the sheep, and a teacher of God and His ways of love. I shed tears as I read it, being grateful for the Lord's lifting of my despair with its timely arrival. She writes,¹⁰

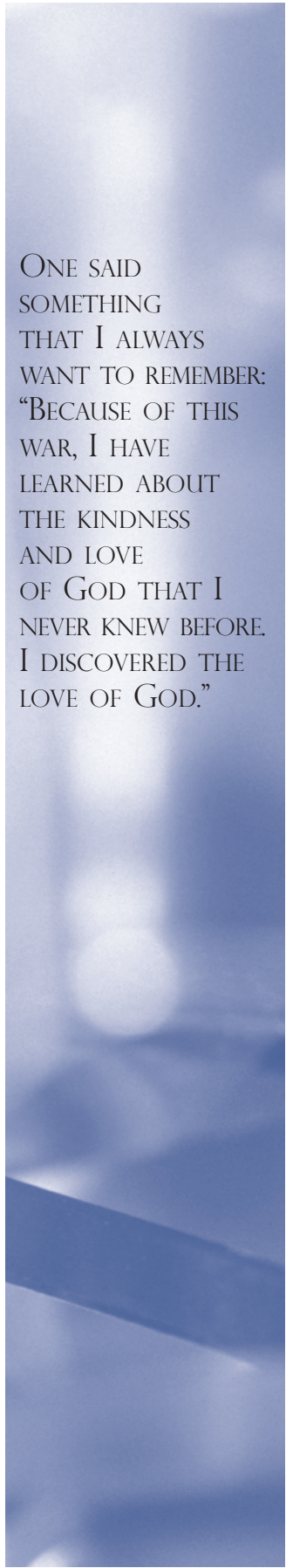
We are still at the receiving center for Ukrainian refugees, commuting back and forth to Frankfurt for airport runs and for some live classes every one or two weeks. I went to pick up an older Ukrainian sister at the airport and spent an hour trying to communicate and find her (though I had an old photo). Finally, I stood in the middle of the airport lobby and sang “Amazing Grace” at the top of my lungs. She came toward my voice, and we connected. This little older sister has lived in the U.S. for many years, but when war broke out, she got on a plane to come help us. I’ll be honest. When I first met her, I wondered whether she would be helpful, but I was wrong. She turned out to be a feisty powerhouse of a shepherd who took care of everyone whom we couldn’t reach because of the language barrier. She whipped up borsch for lunch and stayed up far into the night one night making Ukrainian dumplings that made our guests feel so at home. After several weeks, we drove her to the airport, and I tried to escort her to her gate so she wouldn’t get lost. An airline employee came on a golf cart to take her and stared while we cried and hugged and said things in broken English while she stuffed money into my jacket pockets to buy chocolate for the kids she had taken care of. For all the world, she reminded me so much of my own mom, though there was no resemblance in language, culture, or appearance. I just want to say that the humans I have served with during this surreal time have made it extraordinary and humbling.

There have been a lot of goodbyes here. I could not have anticipated their impact. Most of the ones I have written to you about have moved on to settle in other cities. Family by family, or in little groups, they have left and gone to live in localities throughout Germany. A few have even gone back to the Ukraine because it was too hard here without the families they left behind. When people leave, it is an event. It reminds me of the feeling of witnessing a baptism. They come out to the road that leads to the exit with all their possessions, and the serving ones and other Ukrainian saints gather and pray and sing and cry and hug them and give them gifts and send them to places they have never been. Once, the whole group walked a kind of ceremonial walk around the property with everyone. They go, and then we pray desperately that the saints who are receiving them will connect with them, break through the language barriers to greet them, have the grace to have them live in their homes, that their kids will be ok in new schools, and that the Lord will meet their needs when their government support doesn’t come through in a timely way and they don’t want to tell anyone that they can’t buy shampoo or laundry soap. They stay in our hearts, and they text sometimes, missing home. This week, I got a letter from one of the little girls who moved. It’s in broken English, covered in stickers and says she is praying that the Lord will bless my family (keeping this one).

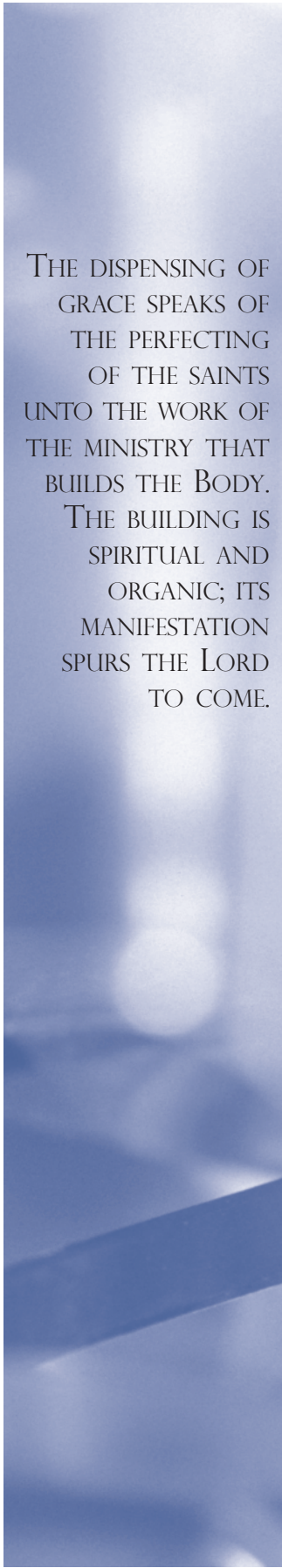
One night, twelve girls piled into a couple of cars, and we went into the town nearby for tea and cake because four of them were leaving the next morning. The ones we were having the goodbye party for were four of our quietest Ukrainian sisters. All were under 20 years old and living with us without any other family members. At the cafe, they laughed, and their eyes twinkled as they tried to decide what to order from the cake cabinet. We asked them what they would remember about their time, and instantly, all of them shed tears. One of them said something that I always want to remember: “Because of this war, I have learned about the kindness and love of God that I never knew before. I discovered the love of God.”

Some of the ones who have gone have moved to join small groups of saints in cities we have prayed for since we came to Germany. We have visited some of these cities and done Bible distribution in some of them. Now, these Ukrainian saints are going to these very places. It’s crazy. I just want them to make it, to thrive in all these new homes. Of course, they will need to find apartments, jobs, schools, healthcare, and learn German, which seems completely overwhelming to me. Please pray for this.

New saints are arriving as others are moving on. There are more small children and more traumatized humans who left the Ukraine later. I just want to admit that I am coming up short. When the first bus came, I opened my heart wide. Now I am struggling to meet the new arrivals because I feel like I don’t have much left. Of course, it’s just a matter of time that they start to grow on me, but I feel numb and small in the face of human suffering and attempts to connect through Google Translate on my phone.



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This week, we went to Ikea and got new toys for a growing group of very young kids. We worked and set up a nice playroom for them with a little kitchen, table, and chairs, the Ikea fabric pizza, pots and pans, a train set, and the like. There are two shelves of toys now. As we were working on it, our littlest ones came in and started opening packages and helping to put things away. They were so delighted. At one point, a tiny girl was giving orders to a tiny boy who had a towel over one arm like a waiter. He made pretend pizza and served it to the third child as they jabbered away in Ukrainian. Then, a mom came and cried and hugged us and thanked us for making the kids happy. We just looked at each other and melted. Downstairs in the same building, there is a little classroom where just a couple are coming and beginning to quilt and knit and so on. This is a dream come true. One sister made her first quilt and told us how she told the Lord that she wanted to learn to make a quilt, and having this chance was the Lord's tender care for her.

Recently, I've been thinking about mercy a lot. Imagine a work situation where there is a person who causes trouble. But the one who has the authority to dismiss this person is full of mercy and compassion. The more trouble this person causes, the more brightly the mercy and compassion of the one in authority shines. The more cantankerous, opinionated, unyielding, and curmudgeonly this person is, the more tender the mercy shown to him. On occasion, I have witnessed this kind of thing and been in awe of this, and it has made me consider how God's mercy embraces and envelops us. He loves us without reason. The One whom we drink of and eat of every day is Mercy. And because of His mercy, He gives us opportunities to show mercy to others. I know I always say this, but it's entirely true: We are carried by your prayers. We still need your prayers for everyone under our care.

The dispensing of grace in this example speaks of the perfecting of the saints unto the work of the ministry that organically builds the Body. The building is spiritual and organic, and it is becoming more manifest, spurring the Lord to come. This example portrays the organic sending of an apostle, the organic speaking of a prophet for God, the organic preaching of the gospel by an evangelist, the organic caring for and feeding of the common and spiritual needs of the sheep by a shepherd, and the organic teaching of God's ways of love by a teacher. This organic display speaks of a learning of the reality in Jesus Christ (cf. Eph. 4:20-21).

Summary

The preeminent sign of the coming of the Lord is not the fulfillment of any of the various outward, material events, often interpreted wildly just to satisfy itching ears. The preeminent sign is the inward, spiritual manifestation of the Body in the church age prior to the Lord's coming. This order—building before coming—is confirmed in five significant passages in the New Testament: 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; Ephesians 2:20-22; 4:11-16; Colossians 2:6-7; and Revelation 21:2, 9-10, and 19. These passages focus, respectively, on building before the fire of judgment at the day of the Lord's coming, building in the church age before the Lord's coming, building through the work of the ministry before the Lord's coming, building in the believer's walk before the Lord's coming, and building through bridal adornment before the Lord's coming. There are four spiritual indicators of this building work: loving one another, receiving one another, shepherding one another, and dispensing grace to one another. And, encouragingly, there is an incremental movement toward the fulfillment of Ephesians 4:11-16 in its embryonic stages. Build and come, Lord Jesus! 

Notes

¹See "Prophecy Fulfilled: Israel Becomes a Nation In 1948." end-times-bible-prophecy.com/prophecy-fulfilled-israel-becomes-a-nation-in-1948.html. Accessed 22 May 2022.

²See "Europe's Rise Foretold in Bible Prophecy." christianevidence.net/2018/01/europes-eu-rise-foretold-in-bible.html. Accessed 20 May 2022.

³See S. Douglas Woodward's *The Next Great War in the Middle East: Russia Prepares to Fulfill the Prophecy of Gog and Magog*. Book Ministry, 2016.

⁴See trump-2020-and-beyond.com/the-third-temple and trump-2020-and-beyond.com/trump-prophecies. This website approvingly links the presidency of Donald Trump with the rebuilding of the Third Temple, even promising an election victory for him in 2020. Accessed 20 May 2022.

⁵See video by David Jeremiah, "Who Is the Antichrist?" www.davidjeremiah.org/this-could-be-the-day/the-tribulation/who-is-the-antichrist.

⁶An example of self-pontification appears in Hal Lindsey's *There's a New World Coming*:

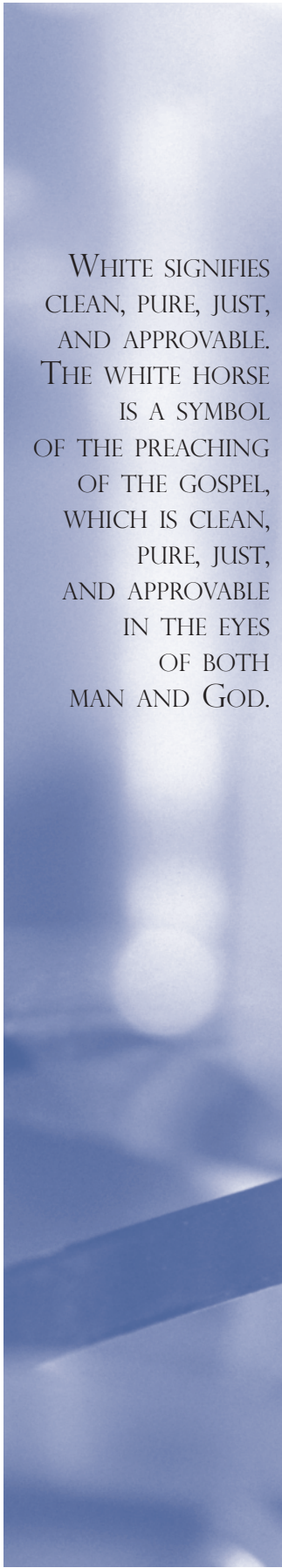
Sometimes John employed terminology which can be understood only when the prophecy's fulfillment is near. For example, John describes a horrible war in which fire and brimstone are rained down on people. In John's day the only thing capable of producing fire and brimstone was a volcano; it was one of the most dreaded forms of destruction. But this is really a classic description of the horrors of an atomic explosion; "fire and brimstone" says it pretty well! Before the development of the atomic bomb no destructive force known to man could equal the power of a volcanic eruption or even come close to fulfilling the description of "fire and brimstone." (13)

There are only eight verses in the Bible that contain the words *fire* and *brimstone*, none of which support Lindsey's interpretation. The first reference occurs in Genesis 19:24: "Jehovah rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from Jehovah out of heaven," and it establishes, according to the interpretive principle of first mention, the basis for subsequent interpretations in verses using the same terms. In verse 24 the source of judgment is "Jehovah out of heaven"; it is not an event on the earth, i.e., an atomic explosion symbolized by a volcano. In the second reference, in Psalm 11:6, which says, "He will rain down snares upon the wicked; / Fire and brimstone and a scorching wind will be the portion of their cup," judgment from God "will rain down." Isaiah 30:33, the third reference, says, "Topheth has been arranged since long ago; / Indeed it has been prepared for the king; / He made it deep; He made it large. / The pile in it is of fire and much wood; / The breath of Jehovah, like a stream of brimstone, / Sets it on fire." In this verse God's judgment is likened to the breath of Jehovah, like a stream of brimstone, setting Topheth on fire. The fourth reference, Ezekiel 38:22, says, "I will enter into judgment with him with pestilence and with blood; and I will rain torrential rain and great hailstones, fire and brimstone, upon him and his hordes and the many peoples who are with him." In this verse God's judgment "will rain torrential rain and great hailstones, fire and brimstone." The judgment is from God, and it comes down to earth as rain. The fifth reference, Luke 17:29, refers to and reinforces the Genesis account of the source and direction of fire and brimstone: "On the day in which Lot went out from Sodom, it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all." The final three references, in Revelation, say, "He [Antichrist] also shall drink of the wine of the fury of God, which is mixed undiluted in the cup of His wrath; and he shall be tormented in fire and brimstone before the holy angels and before the Lamb" (14:10); "the devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where also the beast and the false prophet were; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (20:10); and "the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and fornicators and sorcerers and idolaters and all the false, their part will be in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (21:8). These three verses speak of the final location and continuing judgment of God on earth upon Antichrist, the devil, the false prophet, and the wicked. All eight verses quoted above refute Lindsey's interpretation of an atomic explosion.

Elsewhere in *There's a New World Coming*, some unique but also speculative and distracting interpretations are offered. Concerning the identity of the rider of the white horse in Revelation 6:2, Lindsey asserts that "the white apocalyptic horseman of Revelation 6 is the *European* Antichrist. I personally believe that this man is alive somewhere in the world at this very moment!" (85). Lindsey misidentifies the horseman as a person. In contrast, Witness Lee writes with more credibility:

The first four seals consist of four horses with their riders, as in a four-horse race. The four riders are not persons but personified things. It is evident that the rider of the second horse, the red horse (v. 4), is war, that the rider of the third horse, the black horse, is famine (v. 5), and that the rider of the fourth horse, the pale horse, is death (v. 8). According to historical facts, the rider of the first horse, the white horse, must be the gospel, not Christ or Antichrist as some interpret. Immediately after Christ's ascension, these four things—the gospel, war, famine, and death—began to run like riders on four horses, and they will continue until Christ comes back. Beginning from the first century the gospel has been spreading

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throughout all these twenty centuries. Simultaneously, war among the human race has been proceeding. War has always caused famine, and famine issues in death. All these will continue until the end of this age. (*Recovery Version*, v. 2, note 2)

Regarding the white horse, Lee accurately writes, “White signifies clean, pure, just, and approvable. The white horse is a symbol of the preaching of the gospel, which is clean, pure, just, and approvable in the eyes of both man and God” (note 1).

In addition to the misidentification of the rider, it is highly speculative for Lindsey to suggest that “this man is alive somewhere in the world at this very moment!” Such a statement focuses a reader’s attention on current or rising world leaders rather than on the coming Christ. This is a gross distraction.

⁷The determination of dispensational reward or punishment occurs at the judgment seat of Christ immediately after the coming of the Lord: “We must all be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done through the body according to what he has practiced, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). *Good or bad* here does not refer to good or evil deeds but to the quality of one’s building work, which can be either acceptable or worthless in the searching eyes of the Lord.

⁸*Miniature* refers to a subset of the Body that is, nevertheless, complete in its manifestation of the functions that pertain to the Body, just as the overcomers in Revelation 2 and 3 manifest a proper expression of a local church in a situation that also includes negative elements of mixture, indicating a need for further corporate growth in the divine life. The Body is one, an organic entity produced through the mingling of the divine life and nature of the Triune God with the human life and nature of redeemed humanity, a mingling made possible through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. In this mingling, the believers “who are many are one Body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Rom. 12:5). Regarding this, Lee writes,

The purpose of God’s salvation is to have Christ reproduced in millions of saints that they may become the members of His Body, not separate and complete individual units but parts of a living, functioning, coordinated, corporate whole. Although these parts have different functions, they are not detached from one another. Rather, they are “individually members one of another.” Each member is organically joined to all the others, and each needs the function of all the others. All the members must be coordinated together to practice the Body life that is revealed in this chapter. (*Recovery Version*, v. 5, note 2)

Since God produces and then seeks and promotes the organic union with the Body, He is rightly justified in honoring a subset of the Body to stand in as a manifestation of the whole.

⁹The account of Rebekah’s adornment prior to being presented to Isaac is a type of the Spirit’s adornment of the church prior to her presentation to the Bridegroom: “The servant brought forth silver jewelry and gold jewelry and clothing and gave them to Rebekah. He also gave precious things to her brother and to her mother” (Gen. 24:53).

¹⁰There will be an ongoing dispensing of grace for the building of the Body from the encouragement gained from the publication of this account, and there will be a further flow in all who read it. The Body is being built!

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