

## FOREWORD TO VOLUME 107: OPTIMIST, PESSIMIST, REALIST?

*John F. Brug*

Since the onset of the so-called Great Recession, no matter where they fall in the economic spectrum, people have had to take a hard look at their assessment of the future. Individuals, companies, and even churches are asking, “What should our next move be?” Do we hunker down in a defensive position? Do we begin to strive for growth again? Are we optimistic or pessimistic about our short-term and long-term prospects? Their answer, of course, depends on a number of factors: how do they read the signs of the times? what is their basic personality type? and also what is their basic world view? It is the last point that concerns us here. How does a Christian faith shape a person’s view of the future?

Should a Christian be an optimist or a pessimist? More specifically, under today’s economic, moral, and spiritual circumstances, should a Christian pastor be an optimist or a pessimist? What is he expecting for the world, for his country, for the church, and for himself? What outcomes is he expecting from his ministry?

The last part of the question—what am I expecting for myself?—is the easiest to answer—at least on the long-term spiritual level. Long-term and for himself the Christian is an unbridled optimist. He already knows how the story told in Revelation is going to turn out—Jesus will win! And when Jesus wins, we win. We, in fact, already have won—Jesus lived, died, and rose for me. That is a fact—it is finished—the war is won. With Paul the Christian can say,

I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day. . . . Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. . . . The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom (2 Ti 1:12; 4:8,18).

For himself eternally the Christian is an optimist at heart, but in regard to the events of the endpoint of world history the biblically informed Christian must be a pessimist. Scripture compels him to be one. The Scripture makes it very clear that this world is in a downward spiral toward judgment. As the end draws near, the Signs of the End, which are present throughout history, intensify.

Jesus summarized the Signs of the End in his sermon on the Mt. of Olives, delivered just before his death.

Watch out that no one deceives you. <sup>5</sup>For many will come in my name, claiming, "I am the Christ," and will deceive many. <sup>6</sup>You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. <sup>7</sup>Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. <sup>8</sup>All these are the beginning of birth pains. <sup>9</sup>Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. <sup>10</sup>At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, <sup>11</sup>and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. <sup>12</sup>Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, <sup>13</sup>but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. <sup>14</sup>And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Mt 24:4-14).

These are signs *of* the end, not necessarily signs *at* the end. Their appearance is not limited only to the short season immediately before the end, but the Bible does speak of a short season, just before the end, when the signs intensify.

The End will be ushered in by signs in nature which strike mankind with intensifying judgments that warn of the complete judgment at the door.

There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken (Mt 24:7, 29).

Whether all these signs will be "acts of God" outside of human control, or whether man will play a helping role in intensifying the judgment on the world, we don't know. Will global warming, whether man-assisted or mostly outside of his control, play a role? Perhaps as the End comes, man will be a tool of his own judgment, as he so often is. Be that as it may, we know that these disasters in nature will come.

In some ways the signs in nature and in society will be ambiguous. It will seem as if life is going on pretty much as normal.

As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease (Ge 8:22).

Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. <sup>27</sup>People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. . . . <sup>30</sup>It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed (Lu 17:26-30).

Certainly this is how people view life in the world today. "Everything continues as it always has," they say. Even war, the closest thing to hell on earth, will seem to most people to be "business as usual."

"When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away." <sup>10</sup>Then he said to them: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (Lu 21:9,10).

Genocides that kill millions come and go, and we barely notice, as long as it does not touch us or our interests. Cambodia, Rwanda, Sudan—the toll goes on. "Wars to end all wars" never do. "New World Orders" are short-lived. The slaughter goes on unabated. Only the weapons of choice change.

Yet, even as it all seems like business as usual, there is a downward spiral, a growing alienation from God and alienation among people.

Mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. <sup>2</sup>People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, <sup>3</sup>without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, <sup>4</sup>treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—<sup>5</sup>having a form of godliness but denying its power (2 Ti 3:1-5).

After you have read this catalog, read the newspaper or turn on the TV, and make the matches. Greed on Wall Street and Main Street, pride in human ability to fix the world, callous murders for a few dollars, the Lutheran church opening the door to homosexuality, people deluding themselves into thinking that it is possible to be spiritual without being religious—the matches that jump off the pages of the newspaper could fill a book—or two, or three.

But the signs do not occur only in the world of the ungodly. It is clear that the signs will also intensify in the church. The visible church too will be fleeing from God.

When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? (Lu 18:8)

At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other. <sup>12</sup>Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold (Mt 24:10,12).

Many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. . . . <sup>24</sup>For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible (Mt 24:11,24).

Will Christ find faith on the earth when he comes? Yes, but not much. The love of *most* will grow cold. False miracles and counterfeit signs will lead those who do not love the Word deeper into the dark-

ness. As the End nears, God's people should expect that they will be a little flock. True doctrine has always been counter-cultural, but it will be even more "out of season" as the End comes near.

The time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. "They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths (2 Ti 4:3,4).

As the world travels down the road to destruction, even many of those who were God's people for a time will join it on that road. We see this happening in secularized Europe and liberal churches, but should we expect that this warning applies only to other lands and other churches?

Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them (Ac 20:30).

We have no reason to doubt that this warning applies to us too. There is no qualifier that says "everywhere except America," "everywhere except in WELS." Indeed, unless Christ comes soon, we should expect that the traveling rainstorm of the gospel will move on from this place too, as it always has. So far in history, there has never been a land or a church that kept its first love. Should we expect that our time and place is the one exception to the rule?

As the end nears, if we are faithful to the truth, we should expect to experience the consequences of faithfulness. Indeed, in America for the last couple of centuries we have been living in kind of a dream world, an abnormal state, almost totally free from overt persecution. The rule for the New Testament time period is:

Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me (Mt 24:9).

Nothing gives us any reason to think that there is any time limit on this passage that will let it expire before judgment day. Is the time when speaking against abortion and gay rights will earn more than verbal scorn and hatred coming closer for us too? Just as ancient Israel found itself in the crossroads of the battleground between the great powers of the world, God's Israel of today, his little flock, finds itself in the crossfire between a savage, militant Islam on one side and hateful rampant secularism on the other. These bitter opposites cannot agree on anything except one thing, their hatred of Christ and of those who are his.

The Bible paints a dark picture of the last phases of church history.

But in the midst of all the darkness, there is one ray of light: till the very end the gospel will be preached. Man's time of grace will

finally come to an end, but it will not be cut short prematurely. God gives the world abundant opportunity for repentance. The door remains open until at last God closes it.

This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Mt 24:14).

The weeds and the wheat will both be growing side by side until the harvest comes. Christ will build his church, and the forces of hell will never destroy it.

Revelation 20 summarizes God's plan for the New Testament church in a few paragraphs. Between Christ's first and second comings history will be divided into two periods. First comes the binding of Satan. During this long time (symbolized by 1000 years in Revelation 20) nations that had been slaves to Satan are set free from their prison. They throw away the idols that were Satan's masks, and they serve Christ in freedom from fear and bondage. A joyful Christendom arises, a happy kingdom of Christ that spreads throughout the world to people of every race and nation.

But then for a short time just before the end, Satan is loosed from his prison. Incredibly, the nations that had been freed from slavery choose to go back to serving Satan. It will seem like Satan is regaining control of the world that had escaped his clutches.

Have we now entered this period when Satan is turned loose once again? There is much evidence to suggest that we have. We see the once-Christian nations of Europe sliding into a secularism more enslaving than the heathenism they escaped. In the lands of the Reformation—Germany, Sweden, Norway, Britain—only a little flock remains. Are we in America so far behind? We see the deterioration of the family and declining respect for basic moral values like the right to life and respect for authority. Even Morality 101 seems to be a forgotten subject as sins that are against nature and Biology 101 are promoted.

In light of these realities, what kind of future should a pastor be preparing for? What outcome should he expect from his ministry? If he reads and believes the Scripture, he should expect that as the End nears, most of the world will hate God and his Word. He should expect that most of the visible church will be unfaithful or even apostate. He should expect that most of those who hear the message that he preaches will not believe it. He should expect that birds and heat and weeds will snatch away and scorch and choke most of the seed he plants. He knows that the world is in a death spiral from which there is no recovery, and that nothing he does will change the inevitability of judgment.

But he also knows that some of the seed that he plants will spring up, mature, and yield a rich harvest. He knows that when the Son of

Man comes, he *will* find faith on the earth. He knows that the road to life is narrow and not many are traveling it. He is sad there are so few traveling the road with him, but he does not fixate on that. He is absorbed on making sure that he and his flock stay on that road.

He knows that faithful preaching will produce two results: it will create faith or it will harden, it will bring life or it will bring death. He knows that God will be glorified every time he preaches, regardless of the listeners' response. He knows that he will never use the Word without effect—the effect of life or death.

What he does not know is what the proportion of these two results will be. That is because although he knows everything essential about the course of world history, he does not know the timetable. He knows what the line of world history looks like—like the downward zigzag line of a falling stock market—but he does not know how close to the bottom of the line he is. Is he at the bottom of a trough before another up-tick or is he on the last plunge?

Is he called to be an Isaiah or a Jeremiah? a Hezekiah or a Josiah? As the world continues its downward slide, there will be upward bounces that momentarily break the descent. The faithful services of Isaiah and Hezekiah brought Judah a 150-year extension of its time of grace. The equally faithful service of Josiah and Jeremiah could not postpone the day of reckoning. Judah, as a nation, was doomed.

In 1500 apostasy in the church was so great that it seemed the End could not be far off. But then came Luther, and the Reformation has provided the world and the church with another 500 years of breathing space, a second golden age of faith.

By 1817 the Enlightenment and Pietism had left the Lutheran church an empty shell of what it once had been. The age of Christendom seemed to be ending. But the century that followed was the greatest mission era since the days of the apostles. Even as Europe declined, the gospel moved forward in Asia and Africa in a way that it had not done since the first centuries. And the Lutheran church, withering in its homeland, found new strength and new vitality in a new world.

Today the Lutheran church and Christian Europe are sick, perhaps sick unto death. Do second chances for the world and for a church only come once? Or does God have another Luther and a new Reformation in his plan for the world? Does God have another Walther for the Lutheran church? God only knows, and he has not told us.

On the one hand, the Christian does not have great expectations. It is just as foolish to think that this world can be made into the holy kingdom of God by human efforts, as it is to think a leopard can change his spots.

On the other hand, the Christian has great hope. It is foolish to accept the notion that the decline of the church is inevitable. It is foolish to plan for the future on the basis of an assumption that we belong to a dying denomination and the only plans we should make are for downsizing.

The first folly is to think that we can negate the signs of the end, that we can stop the clock of judgment, if only we can come up with the right methods, or the right institutional forms, or the right style of worship, if only we expend enough energy. This is like the hubris of the environmental activist who is sure that since man has warmed the world by his own actions, he can cool it if only he can legislate the right plan. People have a great capacity for overestimating how much man can control. As little as man can control the forces of nature, so little can we hold back the winds of judgment.

The second folly is to imagine that God can do nothing, that he cannot raise up a vibrant church even in the midst of a dying world. It is the delusion of the defeatist who says, "There is nothing we can do." It is the defeatism of the despondent soldier who gives up the campaign and hunkers down in the fort waiting to be rescued. It is the pessimism of the manager who buries his master's talents in the ground. But even our lethargy and our fears cannot hold back the winds of the Spirit. God has made great things out of little or out of nothing in the past, and nothing can hold him back from doing so again whenever and wherever he wishes.

The biblically informed church is guarded against both mistakes: the naïve optimism that thinks that if only we have the right methods we can change the leopard's spots and the unwarranted pessimism that thinks there is nothing we can do.

What does all of this mean, pastor, for you? You know that the line of time has an end, but you don't know where you stand on this line of time. Do you stand in the place of a Hezekiah or of a Josiah? Will your ministry prolong the world's time of grace or bring it to an end? You may not know which you would choose if it were up to you. A pastor, like Paul, may be torn between the desire to depart and the desire to continue his labor. A pastor may be torn between two prayers. Like Hezekiah he can pray, "Lord, turn back the clock. Give me more daylight before the night comes when no one can work." But he can also pray, "Lord Jesus, come quickly. Bring the war and rebellion against you to its end."

You don't know which way it will go, but it really does not matter. Your ministry is the same in either case—to preach the whole law, to preach the full gospel—nothing more and nothing less.

A biblically literate Christian is both a pessimist and an optimist. He is a biblical realist who understands the truths of hardening and judgment and who knows what this means for his ministry. He does not imagine he can straighten out everything that is crooked in the world. But he also understands that Christ will build his church and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. He understands that God's Word will not return to him empty.

He is not discouraged by the opposition or the disappointments. Success does not delude him into thinking that he can control the course of history. He remembers that the ups and downs of history and the final striking of the clock are determined by God's timetable, not his. The sands of time may run out today. The clock may run for 1,000 years. In God's schedule, regardless of whether we are heralds who will usher in a new revival or who herald the final plunge, the role we have in God's plan is the same—preach the whole law, preach the whole gospel. The pastor who knows how to read the signs of the times won't congratulate himself too much when the momentum of the church is upward. He won't blame himself too much when it is down. He is content with the tools God has given him—the law and the gospel.

Though he is both a pessimist and an optimist, for the Christian optimism predominates because he is focusing on the small picture—the little flock in a little corner of the world, which has been entrusted to him, the flock which is little now but which will flow into a great multitude in heaven. He is not distracted by the big picture—the stormy sea of unbelief that fills the screen around him. He can't be distracted from focusing on his task—gathering the little flock one by one. The biblical realist says, "I am only one man. I can't do everything. But I am one man and I can do something. And what I can do I should do. And what I should do, by the grace of God I will do."