

He Came in Fulfillment of Prophecy*

By John C. Lawrenz

Christians have this in common. They know that the Lord Jesus Christ is their all. His first coming makes sense of everything. His second coming will resolve every matter. From eternity God the Father planned the coming of his Son. The Son obediently followed the Father's script. God the Holy Spirit keeps the world informed through human mouthpieces. The apostles "did not follow cleverly invented stories when [they] told... about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pe 1:16). As eyewitnesses, they give us the certain facts "about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen" (Ac 1:1,2). This apostolic eyewitness, however, is but one of the two that we have to strengthen and confirm our faith. "We have the word of the prophets made more certain" (2 Pe 1:19). We have fulfilled prophecy.

Prophecy proclaims and anticipates, hence the aphorism *prophets tell forth and prophets foretell*. When prophecy proclaims, it is rock solid.¹ It embraces the grand truths of man's sin and God's grace. When prophecy anticipates, however, it is incomplete, even though it remains every bit as solid. Prophecy requires fulfillment. Until Jesus was born, his life and work was "not yet." It was enough for the prophets to believe that God's love, yet to be revealed in all of its fullness, was as certain as God's existence itself.

Yet neither Moses, nor Isaiah, nor David, had a full picture. When these men prophesied concerning a Savior who had not yet come, their faith was reaching out. The prophets longed to see and hear their Savior in his full revelation. God in his wisdom left the longing of the prophets unrequited. Does this mean that the prophets' words were ethereal, disconnected ramblings? No. Moses, Isaiah, David, and the rest of the prophets were not gropers grasping at straws. The Spirit of Christ was at work in them. The Old Testament prophets "searched intently and with the greatest of care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing" (1 Pe 1:10,11).

God's brand of prophecy was more than a weatherman's prediction concerning tomorrow's weather. A prophet's words were measured by a simple test, given in Deuteronomy 18:14-22, especially verses 21 and 22. If a prophet anticipated correctly, God had spoken. If, however, a message was proclaimed in the name of the Lord and it did not come true, God was not with the prophet and the prophet's words were not to be believed. Over the years God put together a mosaic of what was to come, one prophecy at a time. Eventually, enough was there for people of faith to see Jesus for what he was when he came.

Jesus was a prophet himself. Because he was the Prophet, however, he was different from the rest. Like them he proclaimed. Unlike them, he fulfilled. Jesus knew who he was and why he had come. The writer to the Hebrews tells us "when Christ came into the world, he said... 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God'" (He 10:5,7; quoted from Ps 40:6-8). He was God in human flesh, the perfect witness to reveal God's perfect love. He knew that he was the One the prophets had anticipated. "Do not think," Jesus said, "that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Mt 5:17). Jesus wanted the world to know that he was the confirmation of all that the prophets had written. On the way to Emmaus Jesus "explained... what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Lk 24:27). Jesus started with Moses and covered all the prophets. He had ample time to do so. The seven mile walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus probably took a couple of hours. On Easter evening Jesus reminded his inner circle of disciples that "everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms" (Lk 24:44). Earlier he had said emphatically, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Mt 5:18).

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¹ English uses the future tense of the verb to express what is anticipated. Hebrew grammar does not. Hebrew operates with the concepts of certainty and uncertainty in its verbal system. Of the two, certainty is the preferred vehicle for expressing prophecy.

Did the disciples find it easy to put prophecy and fulfillment together? Not immediately! Jesus chided his followers for being “slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken” (Lk 24:25). Like the prophets, the apostles needed the Spirit of Christ to open their minds. Once the connection between prophecy and the Lord Jesus Christ was made, however, the fulfillment of prophecy became a precious and powerful force in apostolic teaching. The Apostle Paul wrote: “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Ro 15:4). Peter looked upon fulfilled prophecy as “a light shining in a dark place” (2 Pe 1:19).

The New Testament is peppered with Old Testament quotations and allusions that bring Jesus and prophecy together. The apostles’ use of the Old Testament could vary. Matthew and his fellow evangelists draw attention to prophecy and fulfillment dozens of times with introductory phrases like “then what was said through the prophet was fulfilled” or “for it is written.” These words are followed by direct quotations. There are over four dozen of these in the Gospels and Acts. Peter and John cited Psalm 118:22 in Acts 4:11, “the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone,” in order to drive home to the Sanhedrin what the Jews had done and what God had made of it. Stephen in Acts 7 used the historical narratives of the Old Testament to defend himself against the charge that he opposed the Law and the Temple. His fellow deacon Philip offered a Christ-centered interpretation of Isaiah 53 for the Ethiopian (Ac 8:32,33). In addition to direct quotations the New Testament echoes the Old in its choice of words and phrases. A good example is the words from heaven spoken at the Transfiguration (Mt 17:5). “This is my beloved son” is taken from Psalm 2:7; “with whom I am well pleased” is from Isaiah 42:1; and the closing words, “listen to him,” are from Deuteronomy 18:15.

What about us, we who live between Jesus’ first and second coming? We have the apostolic Word as an incontrovertible witness to the Jesus of history. Our faith, born of the Word, is strengthened each time we hear the testimony of Scripture regarding our Lord’s birth, death, resurrection, and ascension. We believe, even though Jesus is not with us in the flesh as he once had been with his disciples. Why do we believe? Because the Spirit of Christ convinces us that Jesus lived and died and rose again for us.

Some may say, there were others who claimed a spiritual mission for themselves. They are historical figures, too! What about Gautama Buddha and Mohammed? What about Zoroaster and Confucius? What about Joseph Smith and David Koresh? Non-Christian religions have laid claim to people’s souls on the basis of the ethics, the charisma, the mental acuity, or the high moral sensibilities of extraordinary people who pop up periodically in history. Christianity is different. It is the true revelation of the true God through a true man whose coming was anticipated by divinely inspired mouthpieces from the very beginning of history. The Lord Jesus Christ is unique. He is the incarnate Word, as the opening chapter of John’s Gospel declares. Manmade religions define God in human words, spoken by human tongues. God alone defines himself. He is the I AM WHO I AM of Exodus 3:14. The prophecies concerning the incarnate Word set the stage for Jesus’ unique life. The testimony of the apostles slams the door shut on any doubt that he is unique. “We have the word of the prophets made more certain” and we would “do well to pay attention to it as to a light shining in a dark place” (2 Pe 1:19).

But the question now arises; how do we pay attention to the prophets as they speak of the Lord Jesus Christ? How do we keep the lamp of prophetic truth burning? Since our sinful nature wars against the Spirit of Christ in us, we may ask a better question: How do we keep from snuffing out the light of prophecy?

Ignoring the connection between the prophets and the apostles will snuff out the light of prophecy. Scripture is a unity. Like the two eyes in our head each testament sees Christ. One anticipates. The other fulfills. Together the two of them give us spiritual “depth perception.” The prophecies of the Old Testament are like the threads of a large tapestry or like the dabs of paint on an artist’s canvas. Put your nose to the work of art and not much is clear. Stand back and the scene is obvious and awe-inspiring. When we stand back and pay attention to both prophecy and fulfillment, we can join the prophet Isaiah and the Apostle Paul in saying, “Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand” (Ro 15:21; Is 52:15).

Another way to snuff out the prophetic light is to use the Old Testament to define the New, rather than the other way around. We know that one of our eyes is dominant. So it is with Scripture. Regarding the covenant relationship that God established with Israel at Mt. Sinai, the New Testament declares, “Christ is the

end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (Ro 10:4). God’s justification of sinners by faith without works is at the heart of the matter. The Old Testament tale of faithless Israel is one gigantic proof that human beings cannot keep a pledge of faithfulness to God. Jesus did not come to be a new lawgiver and put humanity under the yoke all over again. Rather, he came as the only human being in all of history who could be holy and remain holy. He did it so that God might impute the righteousness of his Son as a free gift to all. The prophetic word is like a gorgeous frame around a beautiful picture of the Savior. It is a splendid setting for the dazzling gem of Christ’s perfect life.

Scripture gives us an illustration of its own. The Old Testament is a shadow, while the New Testament is the real thing.. Paul says so in Colossians 2:17 as he discusses Old Testament ceremonial observance: “These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”² The writer to the Hebrews (10:1) deals with the Old Testament blood sacrifices, as commanded by God through Moses. Such sacrifices are “only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.”³

The truth of the Old Testament unfolds in the New. The words of the prophets are buds. Every bit of the flower is in the bud, yet the truth is wrapped tight and partially hidden. The truth is not fully seen or appreciated until the flower blooms. Jesus is the blossom.

Still another way to quench the power of the prophetic witness is to tamper with the text. The Word is the last word. The Scripture’s first and last writers, Moses (Dt 4:2; 12:32) and John (Re 22:18,19), solemnly warn against tampering with God’s Word. We must never find something about Christ in the message of the prophets that adds to what is clearly proclaimed by the apostles. Nor may we subtract from the prophets the full range of inspired insight that they brought by the Spirit’s prompting to the mystery of Christ.

How much of the Old Testament is prophecy? All of it? Most of it? Parts of it? Just those passages that are clearly identified in the New Testament as prophecy? How we answer the question has a bearing on interpretation.

Paul asserts that God’s house is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:20). Thus Paul teaches that two groups of authors laid our faith’s foundation. The apostles were witnesses. But so were the prophets. The apostles knew that prophecy was not limited to the sixteen literary prophets (Isaiah to Malachi) whom we immediately equate with prophecy. The writer to the Hebrews says “Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house, testifying to what would be said in the future” (He 3:5). The Apostle Peter asserts “all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days... And you are heirs of the prophets...” (Ac 3:24,25). Of David Peter says, “he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ...” (Ac 2:30,31). Moses, Samuel, and David are fitting representatives of the men of God who spoke from all three parts of the Hebrew Bible, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

Is it going too far to say that all of the Old Testament is prophecy? Don’t the Old Testament’s thirty-nine books contain history, biography, moral instruction, dreams, discussions, and a lot more? Yes, they do. These trappings of humanity anticipate the full humanity of Jesus, particularly those unrecorded details which the Apostle John tells us could fill the whole world with books (Jn 21:25). We hold that “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col 2:9). Furthermore, we believe the Apostle Paul when he says “you have been given fullness in Christ” (Col 2:10). No, it is not going too far to say that every part of inspired Scripture in some way points to Christ and that through God’s Word, Old Testament and New, we may appropriate the promised fullness which God means for us to have in Christ. We have this encouragement: “Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of,... the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tm 3:14,15). Luther wrote in his commentary on 2 Samuel 23:1-5:

² The Greek *skia*&, “shadow,” is the image caused by the interruption of light that gives the outline without detail, whereas the Greek *sw-ma*, “reality,” is the physical body.

³ Here Greek for reality is *ei) kw&n*, the very image as opposed to the likeness.

We Christians have the meaning and import of the Bible because we have the New Testament, that is, Jesus Christ, who was promised in the Old Testament and who later appeared and brought with Him the light and true meaning of Scripture... For that is the all-important point on which everything depends. Whoever does not have or want this Man properly and truly who is called Jesus Christ, God's Son, whom we Christians proclaim, must keep his hands off the Bible—that I advise. He will surely come to naught. The more he studies, the blinder and more stupid he will grow, be he Jew, Tartar, Turk, Christian, or whatever he wants to call himself.⁴

It is not necessary that every part of the Old Testament be prophetic to the same degree. Some things the prophets say will stand out like searchlights. Others will cast but a dim shadow. The prophets' contributions are not unlike those made by the members who form the church, the body of Christ. Each member is a part of the body, yet all members are not eyes or ears. Some members serve lesser, yet still important, functions. The frame into which the Old Testament places Christ has many angles. The setting has many sides. The bud has many petals. The shadow has many edges.

It is always wise to begin with passages that the New Testament identifies as fulfillments of prophecy. These are the searchlights which stand out. They are the lights by which we learn how to search the rest of the Old Testament with care. Identified prophecies show us the Holy Spirit at work as an interpreter. One thing will strike us immediately. Most citations deal with the person and work of Jesus. Sometimes we grasp the connection between prophecy and fulfillment immediately. Sometimes the Holy Spirit's interpretation is not what we would expect. This underscores why the prophets had to search their prophecies with diligence.

Prophecies cited in the New Testament touch all aspects of the Savior, such as who Jesus is, what Jesus came to do, where he would appear, when and how God's plan would be carried out, and why Jesus is so important. A few examples will illustrate. According to David Jesus is both the Lord God (Ps 110:1; Mt 22:44) and true man (Ps 8:4-6; He 2:6-8), yet he was without sin according to Isaiah (53:9; 1 Pe 2:22). The ministry of Jesus would be in Galilee as Isaiah had said (9:1,2; Mt 4:15-16).⁵ Yet the Savior would appear in Jerusalem according to Zechariah (13:7; Mt 26:31). Jesus came to instruct humanity in the ways of God (Ps 78:2; Mt 13:35), to bear the infirmities and diseases of people (Is 53:4; Mt 8:17), and to heal their wounds as Isaiah predicted (53:5; 1 Pe 2:24). According to Zechariah his disciples would desert him (13:7; Mt 26:31) and leave him to be pierced by his foes (12:10; Jn 19:37). He would hang, accursed, on a tree (Dt 21:23; Ga 3 13).⁶ Even so, no bones of his body would be broken (Ps 34:20; Jn 19:36),⁷ nor would his body rot in the grave (Ps 16:10; Ac 2:31). Rather he would sit at God's right hand in glory (Ps 110:1; Ac 2:34). Salvation would manifest itself in the last days and be accompanied by an outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Jl 2:28-32; Ac 2:17-21). The Spirit in turn would be poured out through preaching, according to Isaiah (61:1,2; Lk 4:18,19). And why this outpouring? "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Ac 10:43).

Once we have exhausted the study of the prophecies that are directly identified with Jesus, we take our place alongside the prophets who "searched intently, and with the greatest of care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing" (1 Pe 1:10,11). In a short paper it will be possible to offer only a sample of what may be found. We will use the words of the Second Article of the Apostles Creed. It is a summary of the apostolic doctrine concerning Jesus. Next to the Creed's words and phrases describing Jesus, we will muster those Old Testament concepts and themes which anticipated the full truth of the New Testament message.

⁴ Quoted in Oswald & Robbert, *Luther as Interpreter of Scripture* (Concordia, 1982), p. 121.

⁵ Isaiah anticipates that the Messianic light would appear in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, i.e., Galilee. Matthew cites Isaiah as Jesus moves from Nazareth (in Zebulun) to Capernaum (in Naphtali).

⁶ The cross as an instrument of salvation, rather than shame, is also prophesied. Moses lifted up a bronze snake in the wilderness to save the dying (Nu 21:8,9). Jesus applies this to the gift of eternal life wrought by his crucifixion (Jn 3:14,15).

⁷ The Passover lamb's bones were not to be broken (Ex 12:46; Nu 9:12).

We believe in *Jesus*. Jesus is the special name chosen by God for Mary's son (Lk 1:31).⁸ "It means "the Lord saves." The Old Testament is a series of saving acts on the Lord's part: Noah and his family preserved in the ark (Go 6-9), Jacob's offspring ushered through the Red Sea (Ex 14), Israel carried on eagles' wings to the mountain of God (Ex 19:4) and to the Promised Land like sheep led by a shepherd (Ps 78:52-55), Balaam the sorcerer frustrated in his mission to curse God's people (Nu 22-24), Joshua in Ajalon when the sun stood still (Jos 10) and at his farewell when recalling God's saving acts in the past (Jos 24),⁹ Gideon winning at Moreh with a mere handful of men (Jdg 7), Samuel turning Israel's fortunes around at Ebenezer (1 Sm 7), David striking down Goliath (1 Sm 17), Esther on Purim, Daniel in the lion's den (Dn 6), and the remnant of Israel brought back to Zion in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah.

We believe in Jesus *Christ*. Christ means "anointed one." Jesus was called to fulfill all that the anointed ones of the Old Testament tried, but failed, to do. Aaron's priesthood served the spiritual needs of God's people in Shiloh for almost 400 years. Priests were anointed to offer sacrifices (He 5:1), to distinguish that which was ceremonially clean from what was unclean (Lv 10:10), and to teach the people (Lv 10:11; Mal 2:7). Yet the priests failed to meet God's standard of perfection. The priests were sinners, all the way from Aaron, who crafted the golden calf (Ex 32:1-6), to the sons of Eli, who debauched the sanctuary (1 Sm 2:12-17,22,25).¹⁰

God anointed kings to shepherd the nation (2 Sm 5:2; 7:7) and be guardians of God's truth (Dt 17:18-20). Some like David and Solomon served the spiritual needs of the people, but all had feet of clay. David's sin with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah touched off a series of rebellions that tore at the fabric of the kingdom. For all of Solomon's wisdom, he did not rule well when he violated the three prohibitions laid down by Moses (Dt 7:25) and Joshua (Jos 23:7,12), those against intermarriage, treaties with the Canaanites, and idolatry. Saul, Israel's first king, committed suicide (1 Sin 31:4). Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, was blinded after seeing the royal seed slaughtered, while Jerusalem and the Temple smoldered (2 Kgs 25:7).

Prophets were anointed to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth (1 Kgs 17:24; 22:16). Over the closing years of the Old Testament the prophets towered. They preached sin and proclaimed grace in order to keep a corrupt, idolatrous Israel from suffering the curses of the Law they so richly deserved. The prophets, however, did not halt Israel's slide to destruction. The failure of these, and of all the Old Testament "christs," educated Israel to hope for a better Christ to come.

We believe in Jesus Christ, *his only Son*... Speaking for God, the prophet Hosea said: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me" (Hos 11:1,2). The Lord selected Israel from all the nations to demonstrate his desire to include the human race in his family. Through the covenant struck on Sinai, the heavenly Father singled Israel out as the firstborn of all the nations (Ex 4:22; Jr 31:9).

This truth was renewed each generation through the redemption of the firstborn (Ex 13:11-13). Upon leaving Egypt the firstborn of the tribes were redeemed by setting aside one man from the tribe of Levi for each firstborn. Because there were not enough Levites, a few firstborn had to be redeemed with five shekels of silver (Nu 3:11-13,41). Money continued to be used to redeem the firstborn through the following generations.¹¹ Levites remained the "redemption price" throughout the rest of the Old Testament. Their special duties were to

⁸ Throughout the centuries leading up to the birth of Jesus, God intervened to give or change names, often in conjunction with key events in salvation history. The Lord gave new names to Abraham, "father of many" (Ge 17:5), to Sarah, "princess [of kings]" (Ge 17:15), and Jacob, "he who struggles [with God] and wins" (Ge 32:28). The names of many Old Testament believers were short sentences that were testimonials, e.g., Elijah, "My God is the Lord." An angel named the forerunner of Jesus, "John," that is, "God is gracious" (Lk 1:13,60).

⁹ In his farewell Joshua asked Israel whether they wished to keep God's covenant. When they said yes, Joshua impressed upon them that success would come only by God's intervention. Joshua cited Abraham's call from idolatry, Israel's escape from Egypt, the thwarting of Balaam, and the conquest of Canaan.

¹⁰ The Bible depicts leaders honestly, something the ancient leaders of foreign lands seldom did. The failure of Israel's leaders provides a purposeful contrast to the total success of Jesus, the perfect anointed one.

¹¹ According to the Mishna, *Berakot*, viii, 8, this was done on the 40th day after a male child was born. Mary and Joseph probably followed this custom in presenting Jesus, Lk 2:27.

minister at the altar, burn sacrifices, and teach the law (Dt 33:8-10). “Firstborn” is also a term used to describe the Messianic heir to the throne of David (Ps 89:27).

As strong as the concept of the firstborn was in the Old Testament, neither the Levites nor the Israelites could do more than anticipate God’s one and only Son. Israel could not return a Father’s perfect love with a perfect love of their own. From the very first Israel proved prodigal. “When our fathers were in Egypt, they gave no thought to your miracles; they did not remember your many kindnesses, and they rebelled by the sea, the Red Sea” (Ps 106:7). The opening chapters of Judges tell us how generation after generation wandered from faith. The failure in Israel of the Levitical “clergy” is highlighted in Judges 17 through 19. Later, ten of the tribes dishonored their birthright by bowing to calves (1 Kgs 12:28-30), something their forefathers had once done at Mt. Sinai (Ex 32:4,8). The kingdoms of Israel and Judah proved to be overly religious. They had rituals, sacrifices, and gods aplenty. Yet the prophets condemn this religion begotten of many fathers. It had drifted away from the one and only Father’s covenant. It was devoid of fatherly charity. Indeed, the more the Father poured out his love on Israel, the further his chosen “son” wandered from him. Wayward Israel drove home the point that sinful humans cannot keep a covenant with God. This impossibility is the theme of the opening chapters of Paul’s letter to the Romans.

Jesus Christ, the Father’s only-begotten Son, was the only human being to fulfill the law perfectly (He 4:15; Ro 5:17). He was the true firstborn (Ro 8:29) of all creation and of every creature (Col 1:15,16), as well as the firstborn from the dead (Re 1:5). By his work Jesus creates “the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven” (He 12:23). Matthew (2:15) points out to us how the heavenly Father called his first and only-begotten from Egypt, just as he once called Israel. This son succeeded where Israel and the Levites failed. Jesus was the “light for revelation to the Gentiles” and “for glory to [God’s] people Israel” (Lk 2:32).

We believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, *our Lord*. The God of prophecy is the self-defining deity, the I AM WHO I AM. As such, he is “the Lord [Heb. *Yahweh*], the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished” (Ex 34:6-7). The Old Testament bears this out. Forgiveness, life, and salvation appear in Israel purely by grace, even though failure and apostasy were everywhere. The patriarchal heirs came by their inheritance unexpectedly. Isaac was born to parents past the age of childbearing (He 11:11). Jacob was the younger twin (Ge 25:23). Judah was a fourth son (Ge 29:35) and a wastrel (Ge 38). Judah’s heir was the offspring of an incestuous union (Ge 38:30). In one historical incident after another we see the principle *solus deo gloria*. God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt followed a plan only God believed in. Israel grumbled, Moses gave up, but God stuck with it (Ex 5). Similarly, Joshua’s first great victory in Canaan, the capture of Jericho, followed a battle plan that defied conventional military wisdom (Jos 6). It required irrational trust. Israel was to shout down the city walls after walking about the city in silence once a day for six days and seven times on the seventh day. Yet it worked. The credit for Israel’s victory over Jericho went 100% to the Lord. Other “victories snatched from the jaws of defeat,” such as Sennacherib’s defeat in the days of King Hezekiah (2 Kgs 19), anticipate the universal acts of grace and judgment which foreshadow the first and second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation by grace alone is the theme of Paul’s letters, especially Romans and Galatians.

Judgment was Israel’s lot when Israel pushed grace aside. Think of the army of Israel at Hormah. The Lord had sentenced his people to forty years of wandering because they refused to fight on the Lord’s side to conquer Canaan. When they changed their minds, they were beaten badly (Nu 14:44,45). Think of the blasphemous use of the sacred ark as a lucky charm by Eli’s sons (1 Sin 4). It led to the destruction of the first sanctuary in Shiloh (Jr 7:12-14). Think how apostate Judah considered Jerusalem and the Temple inviolate in Jeremiah’s day (Jr 4: 10; 8:11) and how Ezekiel in a vision watched the glory of God depart from God’s house (9:3; 10:18; 11:23).

We believe in Jesus Christ... *who was conceived by the Holy Ghost; born of the Virgin Mary*. Birth appeared as the gateway of salvation in the Garden of Eden. There God promised an end to the tyranny of sin and sin’s author through a woman’s seed. The first Gospel, Genesis 3:15, is remarkable. The Lord couched his message in language that conformed perfectly to Adam and Eve’s world. Had the Lord used terms like

Bethlehem, Calvary, Joseph's tomb, or even Jesus, these words would have been mere sounds to Adam and Eve. Snakebite and stomping on a snake's head, however, were experiences Adam would confront in a fallen world. Adam and Eve would see the lethal, yet not necessarily fatal, power of venom. At the same time they learned how a crushing blow to the head had the power to stop a serpent dead in its slithering. Thus Genesis 3:15 resembles much of Old Testament prophecy. God used terms and concepts that people could understand in their day, knowing full well that eyes of faith would see the real thing when it finally came.

For generations births were tangible proof of God's promise. Through Abraham's descendant all nations on earth would be blessed (Ge 12:3). God told David that a descendant in his family line would supplant David's desire to build a house of worship for the Lord (2 Sin 7:11-16). Isaiah's Branch (11:1) from the dead stump of Jesse's Judah was Isaiah's wonder child (9:6,7) and the virgin's son he saw from afar (7:14). Micah said this child would be a baby in Bethlehem (5:2). Because of its importance, birth was a woman's crowning blessing. Conversely, barrenness was a cross to be borne. With birth came the hope that death's antidote was near. The golden thread that runs through the whole Old Testament is that God from eternity would conceive a Son in order to save humanity. Eve believed it. Isaiah promised it. Mary experienced it.

Even the Tabernacle, and its successor, the Temple, proclaimed the incarnation. God exists everywhere, as Solomon declared in his dedicatory prayer (1 Kgs .8:27). Yet God told his people there would also be a local place, designated by him, at which he would reveal his name (Dt 12:5). The Tabernacle, a tent, served this purpose from the days of Moses to the death of Eli. The tent had been connected with God's promise since the Flood. Then Noah had peered prophetically into the future. He saw God's blessing residing in the tents of Shem, under whose shadow the other branches of humanity would find blessing (Ge 9:27).

The sanctuary from Solomon to Christ was a masonry building, the Jerusalem Temple. Whether a movable tent or a fixed building, the sanctuary had a courtyard for washing and sacrificing attached to it. As part of the full revelation of his grace in the New Testament, Jesus ordained sacraments, one of washing and the other of his body and blood. Jesus compared his body to the sanctuary (Jn 2:19-21), and was accused by the Jews of threatening to destroy the Jerusalem Temple (Mk 14:58). In his first chapter the Apostle John speaks of the Word "tenting" for a while among his people (Jn 1:14). The rending of the Temple veil at Jesus' death signified an end to the earthly sanctuary as a representation of God's indwelling (compare Mt 27:51 and He 10:20).

We may even look at the furniture inside the sanctuary as pregnant with meaning. The Holy Place inside the sanctuary had a lampstand and a bread table. Jesus referred to himself as the bread of life (Jn 6:31-35), and light of the world (Jn 8:12; 9:5). The ark of the covenant inside the Most Holy Place contained three items, manna, two tables of stone, and Aaron's staff (He 9:4). The jar of manna recalls God's providential care in the wilderness. On the stone tablets were inscribed the Word of God given by God to his prophet Moses. Aaron's staff was there because God had used it to affirm Aaron's legitimacy as the one chosen to offer sacrifices for sin. Jesus is the Christ, the "anointed One." As such, he is the providential King, the prophetic Word, and the One who laid down the satisfactory sacrifice as mankind's perfect High Priest. It was on the ark's cover that the blood of atonement was sprinkled. Through the blood of Jesus God and sinners are reconciled (Ro 3:25; 5:10).

We believe in Jesus Christ... who... *suffered under Pontius Pilate*. Nothing in prophecy rivals what the Holy Spirit revealed to Israel about Christ's passion. Psalms 41 and 55 speak of the one who betrayed him. Isaiah 53 describes the depth of Christ's humiliation in death. Psalm 22 gives us the very words Jesus spoke when suffering the agonies of hell on the cross.

To these direct prophecies must be added the rich prophetic imagery of the sacrifices. Each lamb, goat, or bull that shed its blood anticipated the sacrifice of Jesus. A number of acts were prescribed in the Old Testament sacrificial ritual. The offering had to be brought to a place designated by God. It was made a vicarious substitution through the laying on of hands. A sacrifice required death. It emphasized the scattering of blood for atonement. Some portion was consumed by fire. The import of these acts is significant. Jesus and Jesus alone is God's chosen sacrifice. He is our substitute. Nothing short of his death could suffice as a payment for sins. His blood covers us. Of Jesus Paul says, "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith

in his blood” (Ro 3:25) and “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:2).

The bloody sacrifices of the Old Testament did not actually pay for sin. They were offered for unintentional sins, committed by believers in a moment of weakness (Lv 4:1). Sacrifices were brought by believers needing assurance that their sins of weakness would not cut them off from God or the congregation of Israel.

The four bloody sacrifices are discussed in Leviticus, chapters 1 to 7. Sacrificial offerings were usually brought in pairs. The sin offering acknowledged that a particular sin threatened the relationship between a sinner and God. It was usually accompanied by a burnt offering. By being wholly burned, the burnt offering proclaimed the total forgiveness offered by God. The guilt offering was brought when a person acknowledged that he had sinned against his neighbor. It was usually paired with a fellowship offering, part of which was consumed on the altar, and part of which was shared in a meal of reconciliation. Each lamb, goat, or bull that shed its blood anticipated the sacrifice of Jesus. The Great Day of Atonement was fulfilled in Jesus’ sprinkling of his holy, precious blood to satisfy, once for all, the justice of a holy God who wished simultaneously to declare his justifying love. “We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (He 10:10).

We believe in Jesus Christ... who... *descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty; from there he shall come to judge the living and the dead.* The exaltation of Jesus, the one who had voluntarily yielded his all to save mankind, is foreshadowed widely in the prophets. Almost to a man they predict a turnabout in the last days, some in simple, straightforward language, others in spectacular visions. A humiliated Israel will be restored. Dry bones will live (Eze 37). Wars will cease (Is 2:4; Mic 3:4). Death will lose its sting (Ho 13:14, quoted in 1 Cor 15:55). Captivity will be led captive (Ps 68:18, quoted in Eph 4:8). The Lord will ascend on high (Ps 68:18; Ac 1:11). God will reign among his people (Zch 9:9-13; Mt 21:5). Those who belong to the Lord will find their rest (Jr 50:34; Mt 11:28).

The preceding survey of prophecy and prophetic themes is only a survey, but it gives some idea of how widely the Lord Jesus Christ is predicted and foreshadowed. Some of the items listed above are prophecies which the New Testament identifies as such. Some are not. It is to those that are not that the next paragraphs are addressed. How far can an interpreter go in seeing Christ in the Old Testament?

God gave Israel a thorough lesson on the subject of rest. Embedded in the Ten Commandments was the divine command to rest on the seventh day (Ex 20:8-11; Dt 5:12-15). The seventh year was a year of rest for the fields, orchards, and vineyards (Lv 25:1-7). It was also a time for setting slaves free and canceling debts (Ex 21:2; Dt 15:1-15). In the year following every seventh Sabbath year, that is, in the fiftieth year, ancestral lands returned to their owners (Lv 25:13). Sabbath means rest. Jesus fulfills the Sabbath, according to the book of Hebrews (4:1-13), by the gift of eternal life.

But what about rest in the seventh month? Is it legitimate to see in the feasts of the seventh month the same rest spoken of in the book of Hebrews?

Our method will be to proceed from what we know to arrive at an answer to our question. We begin with Passover, the great feast of the first month. The New Testament treats the feast of Passover in some detail as a fulfilled prophecy. Paul identified Jesus as the slain Passover lamb (1 Cor 5:7). The Apostle John notes that Jesus’ death occurred at Passover (Jn 13:1). On two successive days John the Baptist recognized Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (Jn 1:29,36). In words which echo the description of the Passover lamb given in Exodus 12:5, Peter said, “You were redeemed... with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Pe 1:18,19). Recalling the waving of the firstfruits of the grain harvest before the Lord on the day after the Sabbath following Passover (Lv 23:9-14), Paul calls Jesus “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20). Paul anticipates that Christ’s resurrection will empower those who belong to him to rise also (1 Cor 15:23). Moreover, Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples on Maundy Thursday in a manner that can only be understood as fulfillment. The bread and wine of the Passover meal were consecrated by Jesus to serve as tokens of a new covenant. These Passover foods would be the outward signs in,

with, and under which believers would receive the body and blood offered for the remission of mankind's sin. Passover was, moreover, a feast of victory. The Passover sacrifice in Egypt had turned away the angel of death. It signaled liberation from slavery. Jesus' death as the fulfilled Passover sacrifice anticipated death's defeat on the third day. Christ's resurrection made God's declaration of freedom from sin possible. "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Ro 4:25).

Passover was the first of three pilgrimage feasts that required every adult male in Israel to appear before the Lord (Ex 23:14-17). It was so important that Hebrew fathers were commanded by God to instruct their children in its meaning (Ex 12:26,27). Fathers told their children yearly how God had led Moses and Israel out of bondage in Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Jesus, John the Baptist, and Paul learned these lessons well as children. They also learned about the pilgrimage feast, fifty days after Passover, that marked the end of the annual grain harvest (Lv 23:15-22; Nu 28:26-29) and that looked back at the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai.¹² The apostles celebrated its fulfillment seven weeks following Jesus' death and resurrection. On that momentous Pentecost day the Holy Spirit poured out his power on a reborn people of God, not a people under the Old Testament law, but a new Israel set free by the gospel.

Apostolic Scripture teaches that Passover and Pentecost were fulfilled in the momentous events which brought Christ's first coming to its triumphant conclusion. But what of the third pilgrimage feast, Tabernacles, which fell in the middle of the seventh month of the Old Testament Jewish year? What about this week-long celebration known in Jesus' day as "the great feast"?¹³ And, what about the holy day that began the seventh month, the Feast of Trumpets? Neither day is explicitly explained in the context of fulfillment, although the Day of Atonement, which fell between the two in the seventh month, certainly is.

What were these seventh month feasts in their Old Testament setting? Trumpets was the primary new moon feast of the year. It began the seventh month. On it the priests blew their trumpets (Lv 23:23-25; Nu 29:1-6). The Day of Atonement, ten days later, was a day of fasting and self-denial for the people (Lv 16:29; 23:27-32). On this day the Jewish high priest put off his beautiful priestly garments and entered the Most Holy Place with the blood of a sacrifice to atone for his own sins and for those of Israel (Lv 16; 23:26-32). By contrast Tabernacles was a week-long time of celebration that began on the full moon of the seventh month. It marked the ingathering of the summer fruits that had matured in spite of the lack of rain for the previous six months. Tabernacles was a time for moving out of the family home to live in temporary shelters. These makeshift dwellings recalled the temporary shelters Israel used during forty years of desert wanderings that preceded the entrance of Israel into the Promised Land (Lv 23:33-43). Tabernacles was the time for Old Testament kings to read the Law of Moses and dedicate new things (2 Chr 5:3; Neh 8:14-18). The prophet Zechariah closes his vision of the future with people of all nations streaming to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (14:16-21).

Truths are set forth in the New Testament which recall the festivals of the seventh month, even though none of them explicitly make the connection. Our promised inheritance is in heaven (1 Pe 1:3,4). We are told that the good works we do in faith along the way to our "promised land" will follow us. In heaven we will enjoy the fruits of our Christ-motivated labors. Jesus calls them the "fruits that last" (Jn 15:16). This thought is echoed in Revelation. There John tells us that the deeds of the saints follow them into eternity (14:13). But we will receive our promised inheritance only if we deny ourselves and what we have done (Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23) and rely solely on the atoning blood of Jesus (1 Jn 2:2; 4:10; also Ro 3:25; He 2:17). The words spoken by the saints on the Last Day will not be self-congratulatory (Mt 25:37-39). The hope of the saints will be the blood shed by Jesus. This blood is brought to the Father in his most holy place by the one who is both priest and

¹² Pentecost as the anniversary of the giving of the Ten Commandments is part of the Jewish tradition. Israel completed the journey from Egypt to Sinai in the third month, "on the very day" (Ex 19:1). Passover occurred in the middle of the first month, leaving two weeks. To the two weeks add the 28 or 29 days of the second month. Then, to the "very day" which opened the third month, add three days of preparation (Ex 19:15). If setting up the camp preceding the preparation (Ex 19:2) took four additional days, the total between the first Passover in Egypt and the giving of the Ten Commandments would have been 50 days (14+29+4+3).

¹³ The Jewish historian Josephus considered Tabernacles to be the holiest and greatest of the Hebrew feasts, *Antiquities* VIII, iv, 1. Jesus honored this feast (Jn 7), which had more sacrifices than any other festival (Nu 29).

sacrifice (He 9:12,24). The writer to the Hebrews indicates that the atonement of Christ was accomplished at his first coming and then shifts the impact of this act of atonement to the final judgment, “man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (9:27,28). The justifying judgment will be preceded by the sound of trumpets (1 Cor 15:52; 1 Th 4:16) and will be followed by a time of eternal celebration. When Christ returns to judge the living and the dead, he will usher in a sequence of events that will bring rest to those who in life believed in the power of his death and resurrection. As King of Kings he will read meaning into all of human history. In that day he will reform heaven and earth and all that is in them.

Can it not be said that the holy days of the seventh month of the Old Testament calendar are every bit as prophetic as Passover and Pentecost? Of course it can! The feasts of the seventh month anticipate the perfect rest believers await at Christ’s second coming. They do so in the same way that Passover and Pentecost once fulfilled the events anticipated in prophetic revelation in respect to his first coming. God used the times which bracketed the agricultural year in Canaan to remind his people of his acts of love in the past. This we know. In parallel fashion God shaped the spring and fall harvests to prepare his Old Testament people for their glorious future in Christ. In the process of developing meaning for all three feasts of the seventh month, no Scripture has been overturned. Scripture has not been broken.

If care is taken, the way is open for us to feast on the fullness of Christ in the Old Testament. At the same time our enthusiasm must be tempered with the knowledge that the Christian Church has suffered violence as a result of careless interpretation.

The Eastern church was influenced greatly by the third century churchman Origen and the school of interpretation centered in Alexandria, Egypt. Origen made Scripture fit the learned opinions of his day. He may be considered the father of all modern attempts to force Scripture to conform to human wisdom. Origen was scandalized by Scripture when parts of it described life, warts and all. He had no patience for apparent contradictions in the text. Neither vulgar realism nor careless reporting were worthy of the mind of God. As a result Origen convinced himself and his followers to see a deeper meaning beyond the plain statements of Scripture. Before long it was fashionable to see several levels of hidden meaning behind every passage, particularly in the Old Testament. Scripture’s simple, literal sense was pushed aside in favor of symbolical, figurative, moralistic, and mystical interpretations.

Some of this penetrated the Western church. Philosophy, however, did not derail interpretation. Tradition did. Busy, burdened churchmen relied more and more on pious opinions. These were gathered by respected ecclesiastical authorities and handed down. Tradition evolved into Canon Law once the political stability established by the Roman Empire dissolved and the resulting vacuum was filled by the disorder and ignorance of the Middle Ages. By Luther’s time Scripture had become the church’s prisoner. The medieval church had its traditional teachings. It went to the Bible to find proof, rather than the other way around.

Luther turned the eyes of believers to the authority of Scripture itself. The Bible alone had the power to explain itself, Luther asserted. The simple meaning of words in context had to be taken seriously. Because the true church belonged to those who feasted on Word and Sacrament, Luther expected well-fed hearts to be led by the Holy Spirit to confess the truth correctly and sensibly. Laymen armed with Scripture, he believed, were more powerful than popes and councils. In every way Luther led the people who read their Bibles back to the Lord Jesus Christ, not to human wisdom or human tradition.

Where Luther stood, we should stand. We should not move beyond Luther to hammer Scripture into a systematic, forcefully harmonized dogmatic creation. This would result in dead orthodoxy. Nor should we allow a pious desire to reform people and to force an outwardly better Christian fellowship to divert us from the arduous task of examining the words and context of Scripture. This would be vapid pietism. We should not walk in step with Origen’s modern disciples either. They demythologize and dissect what God revealed long ago. Instead of giving the Bible meaning, they leave the Word empty. Nor should Scripture be considered a religious “survival of the fittest.” The truth of God did not evolve from disconnected primitive scribbles into a tome that still needs redaction. Above all, we who are heirs of a conservative confessional heritage should not in

medieval fashion follow what our churchmen say, right or wrong, because we are too busy, too harried, or too ignorant.

Church history may give us a very good reason to appreciate the unique place which fulfilled prophecy occupies within God's plan. Finding Christ in the Old Testament is orthodox. A lifetime of careful searches, however, will not yield pre-wrapped dogmatic packages. Finding Christ in the Old Testament requires the skills of a good historical-exegetical interpreter. Still, our most polished analysis will not explain the mysterious working of the Spirit who tears down reason and builds up faith for living. Finding Christ revealed in a consistent way over the full 1500-year span that separates the prophet Moses and the apostle John makes it well nigh impossible to elevate the wisdom of a single man or of a single generation to the status of Scripture's judge and jury. Our discovery of Christ in the Old Testament will not allow us to enshrine the traditions of the visible church and its churchmen either. The Lord Jesus is the last Word for the church, not the other way around.

Indeed, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets anticipated him and the apostles proclaimed him, *is* our all!