

Dear Bride

A Letter to Jesus' Bride about the Coming of Her Groom

Dear Bride of Christ--

I visited one of your assemblies last weekend. During a period of pre-planned praise and worship, a song flashed on the screen about you--Jesus' fiancée. When we came to a line about the Groom returning soon, the assembly let out a cheer. Someone said a few words about Him coming back very shortly, comments that provoked more applause.

That "we are the last generation" before the return of Christ has become almost a matter of faith for the evangelical and especially the charismatic sects into which you are divided. Bookstores are filled with teachings about what the End Times are, predictions of when they will happen, novels about how it will feel to be alive during them. Radio stations crackle with energy when their programs discuss the topic. Traveling "expert" lecturers fan the flames of excitement. Songs on the subject soar with expectation.

What does this joyful preoccupation with the return of Jesus mean? I have to think, as Revelation puts it, that the Spirit is saying "Come."

But, dear Bride, as your friend and brother I am also forced to ask: Do you agree with the Spirit? Do the Spirit *and* the Bride say "Come"?

Honesty compels me to answer, with a lump in my throat: No. Despite all her talk and emotion about the return of Christ, the Bride is not "speeding His coming." If you truly believe your Groom will be returning any day now, where is the evidence in your *life*? I know your words. You are totally committed to the *idea* that He is coming back soon. But if you were totally committed to the *Groom*, wouldn't you be getting dressed for the wedding?

Please don't be angry with me. I *know* that Jesus will return for you one day, and I want you to be ready. As part of you, I want to be ready myself! I am not the man Paul was. But my heart beats with his when he wrote you: "*I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him*" (2 Cor. 11:2). So I beg you to hear my words, painful as they may seem. Test them before God, and see if they are faithful to His message for you. For I, too, "*am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ*" (2 Cor. 11:3). Jesus deserves a fiancée who is in love with *Him*, not just *in love with being in love*.

That's all it is--being in love with being in love--if a woman can become feverishly excited with thoughts about her wedding day, yet spends comparatively little thought or effort *preparing herself for her husband*. The Bride Jesus will return for is not to be that sort of woman!

The Scriptures paint a very different portrait of her: "*Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His Bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.*" (*Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.*)" (Rev. 19:6-8)

A woman who truly loves her fiancé will think more about *him* than herself. Her focus will be to make herself ready to please *him* and to make that wedding day special for *him*. That is to be your heart, dear Bride! And since your Groom has lavished His love on you, giving His

very blood to purchase you, how much more should the focus of your existence be "making yourself ready" by putting on the "fine linen" He has provided for you to wear!

That very preparation--the Bride putting on her wedding dress of righteous acts--is just the sign of Jesus' coming that I'm *not* seeing as I scan the horizon. Oh, Bride, you are certainly very busy doing *acts*. Surely you spend much time and effort in clothing yourself. But is your adornment "fine linen," or the latest fad? "Praise and worship" services. Decentralizing from big meetings to small groups. "Holy laughter." Giant rallies for men. Racial reconciliation dialogs. All of these garments are in your closet, and often on your body. I do not mock you for being concerned with these topics. A few (I'm afraid not all) of these garments look rather nice on you. *But none of them are in themselves your wedding clothes.*

By God's own Word, your preparation has to do with *righteousness*. And I am not plucking a text out of Revelation to prove a point. All of the God-breathed Writings agree!

Simon Peter, the Rock, urged you in his last letter: *"The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with His promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with Him."* (2 Peter 3:9-14)

Dear Bride, when your wedding day finally arrives, your Groom will destroy and lay bare your old home and give you a new one--*the home of righteousness*. He's preparing a place for you; are you preparing yourself for that place? If you are *truly* looking forward to the day he returns for you, you will emphasize--not only in position, but in practical life--*righteousness*. There is a divinely appointed way provided for you to speed the coming of that day: *"You ought to live holy and godly lives."* There is a *genuine* way to show you long for Jesus to return: *"Make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with Him."*

I can point to many assemblies who are "making every effort"--heroic efforts at times--for various goals. To grow larger. To build buildings. To address urban concerns. To rescue the unborn. To shore up the family. To experience the latest outpouring of spiritual phenomena. But where is there to be found a *people* who *together* are making every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with God?

Paul, your great champion, never tired of writing you on this topic. To his co-worker Titus, Paul said: *"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope--the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good."* (Titus 2:11-14)

What is the burning desire of a Bride who is truly, in reality, "waiting for her blessed hope--the glorious appearing" of her Groom? She will steer clear of worldly pursuits, ambitions, entertainment, fads, and all other entanglements that could steal her passion for her loved one. She will realize that friendship with the world makes her an enemy of her Beloved's Father and constitutes spiritual adultery (James 4:4). She will pursue attitudes and actions that will please Him: self-control, uprightness, godly living, purity, eagerness to do good.

Bride, are your assemblies filled with young people who stand in sharp contrast with their worldly peers in appearance, speech, character, attitudes, and activities? If an unbiased

observer were to follow your members to their homes and businesses, would their lives look radically different from the world? If you long for your Groom's coming, that's how your "wedding dress" will look!

Paul made the same point when he wrote your Thessalonian children long ago: "You know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night...But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet." (1 Thess. 5:4-8)

Two key qualities *must* characterize you when Jesus comes: alertness and self control. Most people on planet earth, because they are children of darkness, are in a spiritual stupor. Snoring away, they live empty dreams, oblivious to the spiritual reality surrounding them. Most, too, are drunk on self-indulgent pursuits--accumulating wealth, soaking in ungodly entertainment, satiating carnal appetites. Their lack of self control makes them stagger like drunken men, with no spiritual direction at all.

*Please be honest, dear Bride: do those same traits not characterize a disheartening proportion of the people sitting in your pews? How many live in spiritual alertness when they are away from your meeting places? How many practice any significant self-denial in leisure, finances, or career decisions so that they can conserve their *passion* for Jesus, your Beloved? Where are there entire assemblies of believers who are "from the least to the greatest" loving Him intensely with one another, all day every day? Oh, Bride, if you are *really* longing for His soon appearing, why are you not alert and self controlled *now*?*

Paul prayed for you to have an increasing love for Christ. "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ--to the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:9-11). If the Father answers Paul's prayer, what kind of Bride will Jesus return for? One whose love for Him teaches her to make wiser and wiser choices in how she lives, sorting out the *best* and rejecting what in the end will be fruitless, empty, and wasteful. One who will be *pure*, who refuses to offer her heart to selfish, worldly things. One who not only embraces the *doctrine* of righteousness through Christ, but whose life displays the *fruit* of that righteousness. One who brings honor and glory to His Father.

That prayer describes a woman who has made herself ready for her Groom. Will you prepare yourself for Him?

Elect Lady: your forerunner, physical Israel, also was to love the Lord her God with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength. She, too, was warned to be *alert* and *self-controlled*. Yet she succumbed to the world's call to be *complacent* and *self-indulgent*. Israel's spiritual stupor caused your Groom intense pain. He warned her time and again through the prophets. Please, please look through this window into His heart:

"Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria...You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end" (Amos 6:1,3-7).

If any of your elect children long for Jesus' appearing, will they not reject the idolatry of ease and pleasure and stir themselves to care deeply about the spiritual ruin they see around them *in the house of God*? Will they not, as the Scriptures say, "Make every effort to

be found spotless, blameless and at peace" with God? Will the cry of their hearts not be to "live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age" as they "wait for the blessed hope"? Will their deepest longing not be that they *and all of God's people* remain "pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness"?

Those thoughts can be frightening, because of abuses we've witnessed. Most of the efforts I have seen to pursue corporate righteousness and godliness fall in two categories. There are those who would attempt to incite alertness and self control among your members through brow-beating, scolding, and manipulation of emotions with guilt-laden "sermons." It is as though the Word of God said that if people feel rotten enough about themselves, sin will automatically stop happening! Certainly we need to rebuke sin and "expose the fruitless deeds of darkness." But continual public verbal lashings only dishearten those who care--and harden those who don't. Like the Pharisees, we can "tie up heavy loads" for others, but not lift a finger to help carry them. And when has "getting tough from the pulpit," regardless of how high the motive, done much more than weigh people down?

Then there are those among your members who attempt to achieve righteousness through regimentation and control. I have seen entire assemblies organized into a pyramid of relationships. Each person is assigned other members to be "under" them or "over" them as "accountability partners." There is a chain of reporting relationships, so that the people on top can keep rigid control of the rest. The goal is somehow to restrain sensual indulgence by having a "big brother" to watch over the members. The fruit I personally have witnessed involves a whole lot of unhappiness, external conformity with internal turmoil, hypocrisy, and *ongoing sin*.

Dear Lady, let me remind you how your people lived when your faith was young. There was a great fear of God and respect of His word among your people *and their unsaved neighbors*--yet without guilt-laden sermonizing. Your members were "joined and knit together," meeting together *daily* in public and from house to house with "glad and sincere hearts"--yet without any assigned "discipling relationships" or "cell groups."

Your people then *simply loved Jesus*. They weren't pursuing life style, career, or family goals with Jesus somehow tacked on. They were living for Him 168 hours per week, with life style, career, and family fitting in as ways of showing that passionate devotion to Him. And your people *simply loved one another*. Even their enemies had to admit it. The self-sacrifice, the consistency, the purity, the focus of their relationships was unearthly.

Today, dear Bride, I am afraid that most of your people *compartmentalize* their faith. "Church" to them means events--services, work days, pot lucks, revivals--held at certain times and places. "Church" is a part of life--a very big part for the "committed nucleus" in your assemblies, to be sure, but still something they can plug into daytimers and jot on wall calendars.

Yet if you will stop compartmentalizing your life into the "religious" and the "secular" and will love Jesus with *all* your heart, *all* the time, you won't have to compartmentalize your relationships among your members. They'll be sharing meals, rides, and homes together. They'll be calling each other on the phone because they *want* to, not because they've been assigned names on a "phone chain." They'll be encouraging one another out of the *overflow* of their love affair with Jesus.

That daily encouragement of one another is *an essential prerequisite* for the practical holiness the apostles wrote you about. The Word says: "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage each other daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (Heb. 3:12-13). The seven-days-a-week kind of exhortation that *naturally* flows out of de-compartmentalized living and loving will ensure that no one hardens into a

settled rebellion against God. Without daily encouragement, all of us would become callused to sin--and never realize the full extent of the damage, because sin is so deceitful.

The truth is, Bride, that your decision to chop up your life into "events" has turned your people into largely anonymous attenders. A *life* you can live; an *event* you can only attend. The opportunity to "encourage one another daily" doesn't come easily in that setting, and the capacity to carry it out fruitfully is tragically limited when the members see only the *external* characteristics of each other in such an artificial, controlled environment. Shallow logistical rearrangements or heavy-handed manipulation can't substitute for reality.

Dear Lady, something has to change! To prepare yourself for your Groom, you must put on practical righteousness. That righteousness requires that you live with a soft heart, free from the settled rebellion of sin. If your heart is to remain soft and free from deception, you must have daily encouragement and exhortation among your members. Yet you worked *against* your preparation as you redefined "faithfulness" as attendance. Your people are part of committees and classes and cells; they are not, by and large, *part of each other's lives*. And so isolated Christians go right on being religious, but tragically empty and hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

The downward spiral must be broken. The latest fad won't suffice. *You must return to your Groom with all your heart, recapturing the love and devotion you had for Him at first.* You must reject compartmentalized Christianity and teach your members to *love* Jesus and *live* for Him moment by moment. You must teach them that they *need each other desperately* if they are to live that way. And you must part with anything you discover that stands in your way of that Holy Passion for your Beloved.

Dear Bride: the best thing you have going for you is that *Jesus loves you!* Already--right where you are. If He sees you returning to Him with your whole heart, His great Heart will melt with the intensity of His passion for you. He will open up ways for you to become the woman you need to become--ways all of your "church growth" technology could never pull off. He holds your keys, and what He opens, no one can shut.

Jesus Himself is your answer. There is no other.

I do not claim to have *any* word from God about the day and hour of His Son's return. I don't have a crystallized theology of pre-this or post-that. But the Scriptures do speak of His Coming, and they say enough to make me wonder whether your belief that Jesus is coming back very soon could *possibly* be true--unless some very radical changes happen even sooner. Please bear with me; I'll try to explain what I mean.

Early believers were united in hoping for the soon return of Christ, too. When the first generation of believers was beginning to pass away, scoffers in the next began to question whether Jesus was returning at all. Peter assured them Christ *would* return. He offered this explanation of Jesus' seeming slowness: "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9-10).

The immense heart of God is so hesitant to pull the plug on history while there is still a work He wants accomplished in the hearts of men and women. Whether He must wait a day or a millenium means little to the Ancient of Days. What matters to God is that people turn to His Son and find life in Him. Of course God is sovereign. Seeing the end as clearly as He does the beginning, our Father knows *exactly* when Jesus will come back for the Bride. But don't read that statement to mean that our preparation plays no part in His plans--it definitely does.

Jesus Himself, when He walked the shores of Galilee, compared His Kingdom--that's God's rule over *you*, His church--to a crop of grain. There was to be growth, development, and

mature fruitfulness *before* the harvest: "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain--first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." (Mark 4:26-39)

By your Groom's own Word, He wants you to ripen before He returns to gather you in! There is a certain fruitfulness required before harvest.

He made the same point in another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' 'An enemy did this,' he replied. The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn'" (Matthew 13:24-30)

How often this parable has been twisted to mean that Jesus *expected* and *allowed* for worldliness in the church, and that He somehow instructed us to tolerate it, too! Actually, Jesus' own divinely inspired interpretation is quite different:

"The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear" (Matthew 13:36-43).

The field is the world. The Son of Man intended for the entire world to be filled with His Kingdom, but the enemy won over the hearts and minds of many of its inhabitants. The angels, in horror and revulsion, desired to bring a judgment on the world *now* to stop the atrocity of the enemy's rebellion *immediately*. Yet Jesus would not allow that immediate judgment. It would require such drastic action that the life of the crop--His Kingdom--would be affected, too. Jesus wasn't concerned that somehow the angels would be unable to tell the wheat and weeds apart. Any farm worker can do that! Instead, He realized that it would be impossible to harvest the weeds (to bring Judgment on the world) without harvesting the crop, too--and the crop wasn't ready. So Jesus' decision was to wait until the wheat was mature, and only *then* to harvest and bring Judgment.

You then, dear Bride, are to be "in the world but not of it." You will co-exist on planet earth with the sons of the evil one, but they must never be part of you. Satan's activity will not change Jesus' plans one bit. Your Lord will not panic; He will not act hurriedly or prematurely. You will reach maturity, fulfilling every purpose He had for you. *Then* and only then will Jesus return, cleansing His creation of every last bit of the enemy's rebellion. That's when you will truly have a "home of righteousness." But first, right now, your passion must be to mature and to *become who you were chosen to be*.

What is this crop? What are the evidences that the wheat has reached maturity and is ready to be gathered in? It is no secret; the Spirit was very careful to tell you.

Paul explained it this way: "It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the

faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Ephesians 4:11-16).

Here's what a mature Bride will be like:

- United in faith--not split into competing, contradictory factions.
- Intimately involved in an experiential knowledge of Jesus--not stuck in a text-book knowledge of a distant, uninvolved deity.
- Full of Jesus' life and character--not living daily lives that contradict the words you teach about Him.
- Stable--not chasing after spiritual fads, as if they held real answers.
- Honest, forthright, bold, and loving, "up close and personal" each day--not sitting passively back, watching while her members flirt with spiritual destruction.
- Joined and held together--all of her members woven into an interlocking fabric of deep, truth-based, servant-hearted relationships.
- Hard working--not divided into a clergy-laity system, but expecting, allowing, and equipping each member to work.

If that's a mature Bride--and by God's own word, it *is*--then you really must ask yourself, dear Lady: are you actually *more* mature now than you were 1900 years ago, *or less mature*? Are you more ready now, or less? Could it be that Jesus' return, linked as it is with the maturity of your crop, has actually slipped farther away than it was then?

Please understand me: I am not talking about the various theologies out there that say you must take over world governments. I am not talking about growing in worldly strength or reputation at all. *I am talking about you growing in holiness, becoming like Jesus, a wife formed in His image and deeply in love with Him.* You *must* be a people like that. So we all have some work to do!

Right from the start, your people have wanted the End to come *now*--forgetting the work. That's very understandable! But your Groom has always directed you to focus on the task at hand. Remember the day He returned to the Father? You and He had this little conversation: "So when they met together, they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'" (Acts 1:6-8).

Jesus was saying: Don't ask Me about the harvest yet! That's the Father's concern. Yours is to bear the crop I've planted you here to bear. You are to provide a testimony of who I am--beginning right here, and spreading over the whole planet. You've only just now been sown. Be faithful to come to fruition. God will take care of the harvesting part!

It is God's will that you evangelize the *heavenlies* as well as the earth. You will not accomplish that goal by founding missions and clinics, as devoted and self-sacrificial as many of the people are who staff them. God's Word says that the creatures who inhabit planet earth and the spiritual realm will in the end be convinced of Jesus' Sonship and His own Wisdom in only one way. "His intent was that now, *through the church*, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms"

(Eph. 3:10). *Through the church*--not through committed individuals or through parachurch organizations. "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:23) *Through complete unity*--not through slick methodologies.

Your crop, dear Bride, is conformity to the stature of Jesus. That will happen if and only if your members become "joined and held together" in a fabric or relationships in which they speak Truth into one another's lives, working together as one man. That's when the "gifts to men" Jesus bestowed on you will coalesce into one picture--the image of Jesus. And that's when the unbelieving worlds of men and of angels will *finally get the point*: God's Wisdom is supreme and Jesus' Lordship is complete.

Do you really expect Jesus to come back for you before you've finished that task? Would you want to quit before your greatest gift to Him is complete? Would you desire to have the wedding before you are clothed fully in your wedding dress?

Oh, dear Lady, stir up yourself to *reject* the status quo and to re-establish the divine standard and high privilege of *loving* Jesus with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Shun the gimmicks and quick-fixes that promise "growth."

Bride: it is perfectly right for you to long for Jesus' appearing. But please, dear Lady, follow your Groom's teaching. Love Him, as well as your members, "not in words or tongue, but with actions and in truth." The Bride says "Come, Lord Jesus" not by songs or sermons, but by her *life*. If you desire to see your Husband, put on your wedding clothes. Bear Kingdom fruit! *Be who you are to be*.

"If anyone does not love the Lord--a curse be on him. Come, O Lord!"
(1 Cor. 16:22)

"Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love" (Eph. 6:24)



Dear Lady: I have no movement or program to offer you. I am only offering you our Lord. There is nothing for you to join. Only join yourself to Him! Please do let me know if there's any way I can serve or encourage you! I would appreciate any correction or encouragement coming back in this direction as well. "...*Let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*"--drz

