Parousia: Parallel Aspects of Delay in Early Christianity and Mormonism

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The question concerning the delay in the Parousia, Christ’s Second Coming, has been an issue in Christianity since the fateful day of Christ’s Ascension. It is no less an issue in Mormonism today than it has been throughout the Christian world for the past two thousand years. Looking closely at this issue and its development in early Christianity sheds light on the direct parallels between how the delay is felt and affects the lives of members of Christ’s early Church and His contemporary restored Church. There exists today within the restored Church a unique and fundamental ability to combine heaven and earth in a continual process of parousia as we await the future event of Christ’s Coming.

When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven. (Acts 1:6–11)

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These verses record one of the most dramatic events in scripture and paraphrase some of the central aspects of Christian eschatology. Here, at the conclusion of Jesus’ triumph, the apostles are left to wonder. The first Advent has literally taken place, the Atonement has been performed, the victory over death secured, the way of salvation revealed and made possible, Christ’s authority distributed, his church established, his disciples charged. What is left but the long prophesied End, the final reckoning of justice and the ushering in of the Messiah’s long awaited reign over a kingdom of priests and an holy nation?1 These verses answer this question with what is perhaps the pith of Christian eschatology. Jesus Christ will “restore again” God’s kingdom here on the earth and will reign in glory. As for the time and season of this event, we are not told. However, the event is to be proceeded by the spread of the gospel to the “uttermost part[s] of the earth”; the believers are not to be idle as they await this event. Furthermore, Christ will descend in the same dramatic and glorious manner in which he ascended. For a great deal of Christianity, eschatology is a matter of active watching and waiting, an “abid[ing] in him,”2 holding out faithfully and witnessing of Christ as the Messiah. The event will come. Israel will be restored. We must be ready.

Nearly two thousand years have passed, and yet for Christian eschatology it has been a static moment. Much has been written in the last few decades concerning the parallels of the first, second, and twentieth centuries of Christian expectation of the parousia.3

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1 See Ex. 19:6
2 1 Jn. 2:28. See also St. John 15:4
Although distinct theological views on the parousia have existed, running the spectrum from realized to future eschatology (and occasionally adding a new twist), all of these several views can be observed in each century since the inception of Christianity. The wait has neither destroyed nor dampened the anticipation of each successive age. Rather, for most Christians who believe in an imminent or future eschaton, it is usually held that the flow of history logically denotes a nearing of the eschaton. Stemming from the inter-testamental apocalyptic literature (and perhaps earlier), the delay of the parousia has become an integral part of the ongoing eschatology.

Hence, when Joseph Smith, prophet of God, arrives in the thoroughly Christianized West of the nineteenth century, not only is his intensely eschatological message a common one, it picks up right where the two angels on the Mount of Olives in Acts 1 left off. Nevertheless, Mormonism’s treatment of the future parousia contains unique parallels with the various treatments found in early Christianity. Entering the third century, theological viewpoints among the various branches of Christianity ran the spectrum between past and future realization of the parousia (realized versus future eschatology), with the majority of Christians situated moderately in the middle: the parousia was in a sense realized, Christ had triumphed, yet his physical coming would unquestionably occur sometime in the future. Mormons entering the twenty-first century have much the same outlook. Regardless of the physical and future event of the second advent of our Lord Jesus Christ, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

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4 ‘Realized’ and ‘future’ are conventionally used to describe the different ends of the eschatological spectrum; they denote a belief in an already fulfilled eschaton versus an eschaton that is believed to yet be future.

5 As Walter H. Wagner states, “Most Christians seemed to mingle both understandings of the parousia [i.e., realized and future] so that they felt that Jesus was present and coming, that eternal life started now and in the future” After the Apostles (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 9.
Saints confront the exact same questions, dealing with the exact same eschatological issue as the early Christians.

This paper will explore the nature of the doctrines concerning the parousia in early Christianity, focusing on the first two centuries. Specifically we will examine the roots of Christian parousia, the function and meaning of the delay of the parousia, and the impact of this delay on the lives of Christians. Next, we will look at the advent of the Prophet Joseph Smith and the historical parallels between early Christianity and restored Christianity of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Finally, we will look at the meaning of parousia in the post-delay lives of contemporary members of Christ’s church, exploring some of the unique features of waiting and expectation among the Latter-day Saints. Doing so reveals fruitful insights concerning the problem of delay that necessarily persists in the lives of all faithful Christians.

**Early Christian Parousia**

*Ties to Judaism.* Just as Christianity has its roots in Judaism, so too does Christian eschatology have its roots in Jewish eschatology. However, just as Christianity is unquestionably distinct from

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6 As mentioned above, many Christian authors have discussed the parallels between early and contemporary Christianity. This paper focuses specifically on early Christianity and Mormonism, assuming them to be the same Christianity, both established personally by Jesus Christ. Thus, when speaking of the modern-day Church of Jesus Christ, it is often the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that is being referred to. Other branches of Christianity will also be peripherally discussed, and will be explicitly named as such.

7 By “post-delay” I do not mean that there has been a shift in Mormonism from a future to a realized eschaton, but merely that, similar to early Christianity, Mormonism has now experienced the delay in the parousia for long enough that the delay itself has become an issue.
Judaism, not a mere Jewish sect, so too are their eschatologies separate and distinct. The relation between the two seems obvious: Jewish messianism and Christian expectation of the parousia are both essentially a waiting: for deliverance, for justice, for temporal and spiritual salvation. John Carroll points out that “[f] all the signs of God’s activity in Jesus’ own life and words, in the end, one was still left waiting and hoping. . . . [L]ife on earth continues much as before. So he will [and must] come again to complete his mission.” The day-to-day aspects of Christian expectation appeared no different than Judaism. On this subject, Claudia Setzer writes, “A variety of eschatological figures . . . emerge regularly in different communities. . . . Looking at the broad spectrum of Jewish messianic hopes, Jesus’ parousia is not out of place. It fits with the expectation that at the end of days, a figure will appear to make things right.” Thus, Christianity is left awaiting a future coming, nearly identical in character with Jewish messianism.

However, Jesus’ parousia is fundamentally distinct. Setzer goes on to say, “If we consider the concept of Jesus’ parousia more narrowly and specifically, as a human being, a preacher or teacher who returns from the dead to spark the end of days, obviously there are far fewer parallels in Jewish life and literature.” Nicholas Taylor agrees, stating, “Where Christian expressions of eschatological expectation differed from those of other Jewish groups was essentially in their identification of Jesus of Nazareth with the


9 Carroll, 6.


11 Ibid., 173.
Messiah.”12 The fact that Christ is actually present, a human fulfillment of eschatological expectation, coupled with his resurrection, makes for a fundamentally distinct eschatology. Christian expectation is for the return of an actual historical figure who has already come once. Furthermore, Christianity claims this historical figure to be or to have become [a] God. The historical figure on whom they now wait is the same figure that they have known and now worship.

The ties between Christian and Jewish expectation are not limited to similarities in waiting for redemption. Graydon F. Snyder says, “[I]t is clear that the [New Testament] elements which describe the coming of the Lord consist of ‘formal’ elements used to announce the coming Day of the Lord in the Old Testament. . . . [T]he parousia is constructed from Day of the Lord formulae.”13 Snyder points out the parallel images of the sounding of a trumpet, a voice, and clouds (see Zeph. 1:10–16 and 1 Thes. 4:16–18). Other parallel elements are also readily apparent: the “Son of Man”14 will come, it will be a day of both wrath and vindication, a perfect social order and justice will be established, the Lord’s people will be gathered, there will be a resurrection, and it will be a day in the near future.15 There is definite continuity between the Old Testament “Day of the Lord” and the New

14 Taylor, 33, claims that “While the derivation and significance of the expression ‘son of man’ are a matter of scholarly controversy, it is clear that the usage in the synoptic eschatological discourse [Matt. 24:37–44; Mark 13:24–27; Luke 21:25–28] reflects the apocalyptic tradition deriving from Ezekiel and Daniel,” thus affirming the claim that Christian eschatology is derived from Judaism.
15 For examples, see Isa. 13:6, Ezek. 30:3, Joel 1:15; 2:11, Mal. 3:2; 4:1, Matt. 24, Acts 2:20, 1 Cor. 1:8, and Rev. 6:17.
Testament “[second] Day of the Lord,” to the degree that writers of the New Testament were often quoting or paraphrasing Old Testament passages in their discussion of Jesus’ parousia.  

Finally concerning the ties between Christian and Jewish expectation, one can observe a continuity between Old Testament, New Testament, and prophesied future theophanies. Both the Old Testament Day of the Lord and the New Testament parousia are given in terms of a divine coming. Parousia denotes “with-ness” or “being there.” Thus, the future coming will be the coming and appearance of God. T. Francis Glasson points out that “[a]gain and again the prophets and psalmists spoke not merely of the Day of the Lord but they spelled this out in terms of a divine coming.” Old Testament passages concerning the Day of the Lord are replete with images of the physical presence of the divine Lord. Glasson sights such passages as Psalm 50, Zechariah 14, and Isaiah 26–27, 66. He notes that Old Testament theophanic predictions depict such things as the Lord descending from heaven with a host of angels, resurrection, and judgment. “Is it not possible, or indeed obvious, that this is the real origin of the whole idea of Christ’s Parousia?” Also concerning this connection, we have numerous Old Testament and New Testament theophanic passages that actually portray the presence of divinity: the Garden of Eden, Jacob at Peniel, Moses at Sinai and in the Tabernacle, Isaiah’s call to be Israel’s prophet, Christ’s baptism, the Mount of Transfiguration, Christ’s ascension, Christ’s appearance to Paul, and so forth.

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17 Wagner, 8.
18 See Glasson, 259.
19 Ibid., 259.
20 Ibid., 260.
Meredith G. Kline performs an exegesis of Genesis 3:8 in order to show that the event of judgment in the Garden of Eden is a “primal parousia,” a template from which all other Old and New Testament theophanies are patterned, and the foundations of both the Day of the Lord and Jesus’ parousia: “[T]he kind of epiphany that the historical situation calls for is what the original text actually does depict—an advent of the Lord in his awesomely fearful judicial Glory. . . . Genesis 3:8 turns out to be an account of a primal parousia, a record of the beginnings of what is known later in the Scriptures as the day of the Lord.”

As Glasson and Kline have shown, we cannot understand the Christian concept of parousia if we ignore its Old Testament foundations. Nor can we ignore the connection of Jewish messianism, despite the unique features of Christian expectation. “As is the case of many other issues, an adequate account of the understanding of . . . the parousia in early Christianity must reflect both the continuity and discontinuity with Judaism.”

**Literal Parousia in the New Testament.** As we saw above, despite the fact that for Christianity the Messiah had come, the messianic victory was not fully realized in daily life; injustice and innocent suffering continued. Hence the topic of Christ’s second coming was and has remained an intensely important and talked about subject. Every author of the New Testament deals with it. Paul and the “three pillars” (Peter, James, and John) all discuss it at length. An in-depth treatment of the parousia by any of the authors of the New Testament is the subject of at least a book-length discussion and is a task far beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it will be helpful to examine this issue briefly; we cannot neglect at least a basic overview of how the parousia is seen and discussed among the various authors of the New Testament.

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22 Bauckham, 3.
First, as mentioned above, the parousia is an actual physical event that will historically take place sometime in the future. The authors of the New Testament use imagery that specifically connotes a physical event. We began with the two angels in Acts 1 claiming that Christ shall “come in like manner as ye have seen him go”; that “go”-ing involved a physical, bodily ascension that took place at a specific location and was witnessed by numerous disciples. According to the angels, his “come”-ing will not differ. Each of the four gospels speaks of the parousia as a specific event, often highlighting other events that will precede it. Paul often speaks of the physical presence of Jesus at his Second Advent. His statement that “the Lord himself shall descend from heaven” closely parallels the statement of the angels in Acts 1. James counsels us to be patient until “the coming of the Lord.” Peter claims that the “Lord will come as a thief in the night.” Jude makes it known that the “Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints.”

Furthermore, the specific words used by the authors of the New Testament denote a physical event. Parousia roughly means “presence.” Paul often uses the word parousia and uses it not only when speaking of Christ’s coming, but also of his own literal presence or absence (for example, 2 Cor. 10:10, Phil. 2:12).  

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23 For examples, see Matt. 24, Mark 13, Luke 12:35–48 and 21, and John 21:22-23. John is much more equivocal, fluctuating between a future and a present parousia. For a good treatment of this topic, see Carroll, 77–112.

24 1 Thes. 4:16.

25 James 5:7

26 2 Pet. 3:10. Although it is likely Peter was using this metaphor more to connote the unknown and unexpected nature of Christ’s coming than a physical event, it is an extremely odd metaphor to use if he is not also referring to a physical event.

27 Jude 1:14. Again, although this phrase might also refer to other things, the metaphor is very strained if we do not view it as an event.

Matthew, James, Peter, and John also use the word *parousia* in context of Christ’s Second Coming. Synonyms of *parousia* are also used to denote Christ’s coming as a physical event. *Epiphaneia* (appearing, appearance), *phanero* (reveal or appear), and *erchomai* (a bodily coming), are all used. Clearly, the New Testament authors intended a future physical event when describing the Second Advent.

*Other Early Christian Concepts.* Despite the fact that the imagery and wording of the New Testament clearly denotes a physical event, Christ’s coming can be and was also understood differently by the early Christians. Although a literal coming was widely believed during the first two centuries of Christianity (and such an interpretation has never disappeared), from very early on there have been other interpretations as well. In fact, there is plenty of evidence that the New Testament authors themselves intended more than just a future coming in their discussions of the parousia.31

In the past, many authors have seen Christian expectation in terms of an evolution from imminent parousia in the first century to a de-eschatologized concept of the parousia by the fourth century.

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29 For example, Matthew 24:3, James 5:7, and 1 Peter 1:7.
30 For a more detailed look at these words and their use in the New Testament, see Mare, 339–340.
31 For example, in 1 Cor. 4:20, Paul tells us that the kingdom of God is both “word” and “power,” without any reference to a literal kingdom to come. Alexandra Brown says of Paul’s writing that “the ‘already-not yet’ tension [is] everywhere present in Paul—the kingdom of God is both already present . . . and yet to be fully manifested.” For her discussion on this, see “Paul and the Parousia,” in *The Return of Jesus in Early Christianity*, ed. John T. Carrol (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000) 48. For more on the dual nature of the parousia as evidenced in the New Testament, see Carroll, 77–112, and Graydon, 19–35.
century. It has also been speculated that this gradual shift in theology took place as a reaction to the delay of parousia. Although some scholars continue to hold these positions, many scholars have recently changed their views. It is now commonly held that most of the major beliefs concerning the parousia have always existed in Christianity. This is not to say that the delay in parousia had no effect; rather, the delay has always been felt, impacting Christian expectation from the beginning. Representing this new trend in research, Jeffrey Siker writes:

In my judgment, it is a mistake to insist that early Christian expectations were consistently one way or another, or that Christianity started out eschatologically charged only to diminish in hope and expectation over time. Instead, both strands [i.e., imminent parousia and a downplay of parousia as a future event] have always been present, and both can be seen in second- and third-century Christian writings as well.

Siker uses Paul as an example to illustrate this point, noting the contrast between imminent and realized parousia in 1 Corinthians 4 and 7. He points to the same dichotomy in second- and third-century writings. Furthermore, he claims that a middle ground was also established with some advocating

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34 That is, Siker notes the contrasting elements of Paul’s recognition of Christ’s past advent and triumph with his prophecies of a future advent.
“an eventual but not imminent parousia.” This appears to have been the majority view for much of the first few centuries. Wagner writes, “Most Christians seemed to mingle both understandings of parousia so that they felt Jesus was present and coming, that eternal life started now and in the future.”

These three parties are evident not only scripture, but also in other Christian writings of the first few centuries. Siker lists the Didache, Epistle of Barnabas, Apocalypse of Peter, Epistula Apostolorum, and Tertullian as examples of those expecting the parousia to be imminent; 1 Clement, Shepherd of Hermas, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Cyprian as the moderates (believing in an eventual but not imminent parousia); and Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and various Gnostic writings as representative of the more spiritual and anti-literal interpreters of the parousia. It is significant that the second- and third-century authors always used scripture to support their claims. This further supports the idea that the various parties always existed in Christianity, genuine traces of each evidenced in the scriptures. Rather than a steady progression from one end of the spectrum to another, it is more likely that the various camps and members of these camps became more defined as time went on.

It is still possible, and likely, however, that various positions were held in more popular regard at various times. For example, there appears to have been a definite decline in missionary fervor at the beginning of the second century. The intensity of Christian proselytizing is often believed to be linked to the intensity of Christian expectation of an imminent parousia; the delay in parousia has often been explained in terms of a grace period in which God is allowing the sinners to repent. Thus, the first century can be viewed as a period in which the imminent parousia

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35 Siker, 151.
36 Wagner, 9.
37 Siker, 167.
camp was more widespread, and the beginning of the second as a time of a more prominent belief in spiritual or past parousia. W. H. C. Frend writes, “With the passing of John . . . and the last survivors of the Pauline era, the missionary momentum seemed to flag. The period 100–135 may have witnessed a crisis within the Christian communities” concerning whether to remain intensely eschatological and thus actively proselyte or to settle down as a “mildly reforming movement on the fringes of Judaism content with its existing membership.” Wagner agrees: “Christians coupled their expectations for the kingdom’s coming and Jesus’ parousia with fervent missionary activity.”

Also supporting the claim of the imminent parousia position as the popular view in the first century (as well as at various other times, such as the end of the second century through the beginning of the third) is the confidence and defiance of authority among Christians. Again Wagner writes, “Anticipating the kingdom also made Christians confident and defiant. In the confidence that they were the earthly colony of God’s heavenly kingdom, they defied scoffers and persecutors.” A great deal has been written concerning the reasons of early Christian defiance and willingness to suffer, but as Frend and Wagner both agree, the expectation of an imminent parousia is one of them.

Beyond the rather simplistic and general spectrum that we have discussed so far, there are a number of specific and varying views concerning the parousia that can be seen in early Christianity. Not only did there exist various positions between imminent and allegorized parousia, but there was often more than one simple form that developed at each point of the spectrum. Beyond the generalities already discussed, many of these different positions have been explored in detail by scholars like Frend and Wagner.

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39 Wagner, 12.
40 Ibid., 6–7.
beliefs in the parousia are inextricably connected with concern over the delay in the parousia. Hence, we turn now to the question concerning the delay wherein more will be said about the different forms of parousia.

The Essential Element of Delay

In one sense, expectation of an event cannot exist without delay. We do not anticipate that which has already occurred. As we have already noted, eschatological hope was around long before Christianity, and consequently the question of delay was inherited along with the eschatology. We will first look at the necessity of delay in eschatology, the way in which the two are related, and then discuss the various ways in which the delay affected and was interpreted by early Christianity. Finally, we will begin to address the necessary questions that have arisen in each generation of Christianity as a result of this delay.

The Marriage of Delay and Eschatology. Again, one cannot anticipate what has already occurred, so in any state of waiting there must be delay. Christianity will cease to be eschatological when Christ descends in his “judicial Glory” and brings about the End (and, in at least one sense, Christianity will cease altogether). As soon as Christ’s “coming” “comes” the “coming” is destroyed. Thus, the Christian belief in parousia (and consequently, Christianity itself) requires delay. Furthermore, since the interim period is always one of preparation, the delay is needed in order to prepare.

The problem of delay has existed for as long as the concept of divine justice has existed. God’s perfection demands justice, and, since justice has never been more than partially realized on earth, there must be a future day of reckoning. Hence Bauckham states, “The imminent expectation expresses the extremity of the situation, the intensity of the apocalyptists’ perception of the problem of evil, in its sheer contradiction of the righteousness of God.
Surely God can no longer tolerate it. Yet he does: there is the problem of delay.” The same thing can be said about the decrees of God—prophecy. What God speaks must be fulfilled. Prophecies are the words of God. Thus, prophecy must be fulfilled, and in one sense their delay contradicts divine order.

A Jewish Wedding. Jewish eschatology had confronted this problem for centuries. Hence, Christian eschatology, conceived in the midst of Judaism, inherited a great deal of Jewish thought. Taylor notes, “Eschatology does not begin with Christianity, but is rooted in the Jewish prophetic-apocalyptic tradition.” Again, Bauckham says, “It goes only a little beyond the evidence to say that in every generation between the mid-second century BC and the mid-second century AD Jewish apocalyptists encouraged their readers to hope for the eschatological redemption in the very near future.” The irony is that despite the delay through those centuries neither the apocalypse nor the zealous expectation of its fulfillment seems to have been discredited or diminished. There is no question that there exists a contradiction between apocalypse and delay, but this paradox often serves to fuel the expectation. Since the End will come, and it has not yet come, and since many of the prophetic signs leading up to the End have been fulfilled (or at least can be interpreted as fulfilled), it follows that the End must be even closer, more imminent than before.

Consequently, we see a very similar pattern in Christianity. Even though the Christian eschatological hope is centered in Christ and stems from his first advent, a historical fact, the type of eschatology that it is—as well as how it responds to delay—comes from Judaism. Delay and imminence pull on one another in a constant battle. Time serves to fuel both the severity of the delay and the degree of expectation. From this ever renewed tension come several interesting consequences.

41 Bauckham, 9.
42 Taylor, 33.
43 Bauckham, 4.
Results of the Delay. As we look at the results of the delay, it is important to ask when the delay took place, or when was it first felt that there had been a significant delay? Many scholars have placed the crisis of delay in the late first or early second century. Others point to the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem (mentioned in all of the synoptic gospels and viewed by the early Christians as direct fulfillment of Christ’s prophecies and signs) and place the beginning of eschatological crisis in the 70s. Taylor, however, wisely points out that the crisis brought about by the disconfirmation of a belief in imminent parousia could not have begun at this time. Aside from the fact that there remains no literary evidence for a crisis following the destruction of the temple (in fact, Matthew and Luke, likely written after the destruction, seem to reflect the opposite, commenting on the destruction as part of the historical process that would eventually culminate in the parousia), an expectation of the parousia tied to the destruction of the temple would have been aroused in 40 or 41 with Gaius Caligula’s order to install his statue for worship at the temple. The restraint of the Roman army at Syria coupled with Caligula’s assassination stayed what had promised to be a spectacular clash between Rome and Jerusalem. Even though tragedy was here averted, the expectation of tragedy, of a grand eschatological confrontation, would surely have been felt by the early Christians at this time. Their feelings of imminent parousia would certainly have been stimulated.44

Furthermore, many of the first generation of Christians died long before 70, some violently by the hands of their enemies. Thus, they were forced to confront the fact that it was likely they would not live to see their Savior’s coming; “this generation” might indeed pass without the coming of the Savior. Also, from the writings of Paul it appears that, from early on, some groups of

44 See Taylor, 38–42.
Christians outside of Judaea had concluded that the parousia was past, that there would be no future event of a coming. Matthew had quoted Christ as saying, “[A]nd, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” which many Christians took as the spiritual fulfillment of the parousia. Thus, from early on, Christianity faced a failure in their expectations concerning the parousia and began to rethink their beliefs. Taylor concludes:

Far from the fall of Jerusalem precipitating a major crisis of faith, the early Christian records testify to continuous grappling with the issue of the delayed parousia from very early in the days of the Judaean church. Any crisis in 70 CE would have been less acute than that in 41 CE, not least because the destruction of the Temple was no longer seen as simultaneous with the parousia and Christians had by that date acquired some experience in reconceptualising their eschatological hopes in the light of the experience of disconfirmation.

It is clear, then, that Christianity began to deal with delay in parousia almost from the beginning. From what has already been stated, we can see that writings in the New Testament, written toward the end of the first century, evidence this fact. Snyder posits that there are six major motifs that arise in these writings in response to the delay: wait, watch, be prepared, repent, be ashamed or proud, and go (e.g., go on a mission, be involved in witnessing). Writers of the New Testament, as well as those out-

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45 For examples, see 2 Thes. 2:2–12 and 1 Cor. 15.
47 Taylor, 42. Wagner seems to hold the same opinion and claims that the destruction brought about by the over-eschatological Jews was further evidence to the Christians that they ought not speculate too intensely as to if or exactly when Christ would come see Wagner, 8.
48 Snyder, 29–35.
side of the canon, focused on the *how* of waiting. Anticipation of the arrival of Christ in early Christianity quickly became a state of pious activity, accompanied by certain necessary tasks.

This naturally leads to the idea of the delay as either a necessary or a merciful period of time ordained by God. Although justice demands divine judgment to punish the sinner and reward the faithful, mercy demands that time be allotted in which the sinner might repent. Bauckham writes, “Against the apocalyptists’ longing for eschatological righteousness . . . must be set the patience of God who characteristically holds back from condemning the sinner while he may still repent.” Concerning this explanation, Wagner writes that “God delayed the parousia out of love and patience for humanity, for God wanted as many persons as possible to hear and respond to the good news in Jesus.”

Alongside this is the positive nature of suffering, a time to prove our patience and humility to God, a willingness to follow the example of Jesus. These two themes seem to be what Peter had in mind when he said, “[I]f, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. . . . Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example.” Wagner claims that this idea is ubiquitous in the New Testament, that “the delay depicted God as testing the faithfulness of Christians. As Job had been tested, so believers were being probed by the devil. Through persecutions, heresies, temptations to sin, and doubts about God’s work in Jesus, they were being sifted and purified.”

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49 Carroll cites numerous examples of this in James, Hebrews, John, and other New Testament books, specifically see 113–146. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the literal imminence of the parousia is critical throughout the New Testament.


52 1 Peter 2:20–21.

53 See Wagner, 8 and fn 12.
Revelation, written around the end of the first century, also holds the same message of positive reconciliation between the demand of imminent justice and the delay of the parousia. In Pauline fashion, John combines the ideas of an already victorious advent with a yet-to-come victory in the Second Advent. Chapter 1 tells us that “he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him,” and also makes known that the triumph of the Christ has occurred, he is resurrected and glorified, the salvation of mankind is already obtained. Bauckham claims that this theme in Revelation “gives a fresh meaning to the delay.” Namely, the delay is “the time of the church’s universal mission, characterized by the suffering witness in discipleship to the crucified Christ.” Such a message brought a new perspective to Christians concerning the problem of theodicy contained in the delay: “Innocent suffering still cries out for eschatological righteousness. . . . But on the other hand, God delays the parousia not simply in spite of his people’s sufferings, but actually so that his people may suffer that positive, creative suffering which comes to the followers of the cross of Christ.”

These themes are also shown in later writings. Jeffrey Siker notes them in the Shepherd of Hermas (9.5.1–2, 7), a parable in which a building is being built (likely representing the Church). Even after the building is completed, the work is not finished. The lord of the building must first come and inspect the stones, replacing the rotten stones with good ones. Siker says, “This is a builder who wants to get it right and is patiently waiting until the tower is finished as designed.” These same themes seem to find

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54 See verses 7, 10–18. This duality is maintained throughout the text, for instance 3:20–21 and elsewhere tells us that Christ has already overcome all things, and yet the book ends with Christ’s declaration that “Surely I come quickly” coupled with the prayer “Even so, come, Lord Jesus” (22:20).
55 Bauckham, 36.
56 Siker, 155–156.
their extreme in the writings of Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Clement’s focus is in on education. Each of us is capable of a divine education that leads gradually to our perfection. Thus, the parousia is not imminent, but rather is delayed while we are educated to perfection. Our individual perfection and union with God is where the parousia takes place. Similarly, Origen believed the parousia to be the gradual perfecting of the universe, restoring it to the creation state. The parousia is a constantly occurring event.\textsuperscript{57} Also in like fashion, is the idea that the imminent and “sudden” coming of Christ refers to each individual’s death. “The parousia of Jesus as cosmic judge and liberator is thus transformed into a personal coming of Jesus to the individual at the moment of death.”\textsuperscript{58}

A final result of the delay that appears to have affected Christianity was a steady shift from an emphasis on Jesus as Messiah to an emphasis on Christian doctrine and theology. As the Christians shifted their focus to theology, their theology began to shift as well. Christianity at the end of the first and beginning of the second century was diverse with numerous doctrinal suppositions believed in the various Christian communities. The warnings of the apostles that false teachers would arise and that there would be a wrestling of the truth began to hit home.\textsuperscript{59} In time this diversity was seen as a fulfillment of these prophecies and yet another sign that the parousia was imminent. Thus, in part due to the delay and the imminence of the parousia, the second half of

\textsuperscript{57} As we have already noted, the idea of past or present parousia is also evidenced in scripture. Concerning this, Wagner writes “Jesus left the believers when he died, but after the resurrection he returned to be with them forever. His physical ‘with-ness’ was transformed by the resurrection into a constant spiritual parousia” see Wagner, 9 and cites John 3 and 11 as evidence.

\textsuperscript{58} Carroll, 198.

\textsuperscript{59} For a thorough discussion of this see Wagner, 63–65, and the subsequent chapters that deal with the second-century focus on theology.
the second century saw the emergence of intense theological focus, creativity, and distinct Christian sects.

*The Perennial Questions of Delay.* We have already alluded to the fact that each successive generation born within an eschatological community renews and redresses the paradox created by apocalyptic prophecy and delay. As delay and expectation are perpetuated so are the questions, fears, and doubts that are associated, and each new generation asks these same questions and is forced to confront them anew. The answers and treatment of these questions given by the previous generation do not eliminate the need of the successive generation to ask them again. This is true even if the successive generation appears to merely adopt the same positions. Before such an adoption can take place there is a necessary crisis and struggle required in which the faith of each generation is always tried.

Wagner articulates a host of these perennial questions worth repeating here:

Were Jesus’ critics and opponents right when they said that Jesus and his followers were wrong? Was Christianity a mistake or, worse, a fraud? Were the arguments within congregations signs of disunity, a telltale mark of error? . . . What should Christians do when those who spoke in tongues of angels claimed that the congregation’s leaders were not valid authorities, or that Jesus was not raised from the dead? How should believers regard sinners in their own ranks—didn’t baptism drown sinful desires among Christians? Where was Jesus now that they needed him? Indeed, who was Jesus, and how did he relate to God and humanity? What is evil, and what is God or Jesus doing about it? Who are we—as humans and as believers? What are we doing in and through the church? How do we live now? Is the kingdom still coming, is it here already, or is another kind of future than we expected in store for us?60

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60 Wagner, 7–8.
Just as the majority opinion often cycled concerning the proper set of beliefs on the spectrum of parousia interpretation, various positions being emphasized at different times, so too certain periods in Christian history have felt the weight of these questions more keenly than others. The time of the Reformation and the writings of Martin Luther are illustrative. It does not appear that Luther’s faith in God or the eventual parousia was ever shaken by these questions, but it is obvious that these questions weighed heavily on him, resulting in an intense longing for the Day of the Lord. The older he grew, the more convinced he was that the world, and specifically Christianity, had reached a point of absolute inability to solve its problems, and he yearned only for the parousia. “It [the world] is the devil’s child. . . . [I]t cannot be helped nor advised.” “Therefore I know of no other advice and help than the coming of the Last Day.” “Help, dear Lord God, that the blessed day of your holy future will soon come.”

Due to the perennial nature of these questions, an incredible amount of literature has been published in the twentieth century concerning the various sects of contemporary Christianity and their response. Unique among all of this, however, are the writings of Mormonism’s nineteenth- and twentieth-century prophets, beginning with Joseph Smith. It is to the parallels between initial and restored Christianity and Mormonism’s treatment of the questions of delay that we now turn our attention.

Initial and Restored Christianity

It is tremendously ironic that philosophy’s “death of God” and the onset of nihilism occurs almost synonymously with Joseph Smith’s audacious declaration, “I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the

air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*62 Joseph declared unabashedly that on numerous occasions he had seen and spoken with the Father and the Son, angels, prophets and peoples of past dispensations, and that revelations from the Holy Ghost flowed before him almost constantly.63 On one occasion the prophet said, “It is my meditation all the day, and more than my meat and drink, to know how I shall make the Saints of God comprehend the visions that roll like an overflowing surge before my mind.”64 He was a prophet of God, called to gather a people of the Lord and prepare the earth for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. From what he wrote of his experiences, beginning with his second vision (this one of an angel that appeared to him five times in less than twenty-four hours), the heavenly message that Joseph received was that the prophecies were shortly to be fulfilled—now was the time immediately preceding the parousia. The heavens were opened. God had again called a prophet and established his people. The parousia was near at hand.

Despite the triumph of this message (or rather because of it), the event of the Restoration directly parallels the scene in Acts that we began with. Christ had come, had triumphed, his kingdom was here upon the earth, and all that was left was to prepare and wait for the Second Coming. So also with Joseph’s message: Christ had appeared again and God spoke with man, after a long night of darkness his kingdom was again established, now all that was left was to prepare and wait for the Second Coming. Both the establishment of early Christianity and its Restoration some eighteen-hundred years later proclaimed: victory has already been secured! now wait . . .

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62 JS—H 1:17.
63 See D&C 121:33, 45 and 128:19–21.
Latter-day Saint Scripture. Along with the Old and New Testament, Latter-day Saint scripture\(^{65}\) is replete with eschatology and prophecy of the End. The Book of Mormon claims specifically to be written for the last days. Much of it is addressed personally to those who are reading it in the last days: “Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing.”\(^{66}\) Among the apocalyptic prophecies that list the signs of the last days are prophecies specifically about the founding of America and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints being established. Furthermore, the Book of Mormon claims that its coming forth to the world is itself a sign that Jesus Christ is about to make his second appearance.\(^{67}\)

It is difficult to imagine a more eschatological book, one that places more emphasis on the imminent return of the Savior, than the Doctrine and Covenants. Over and over the message is repeated that Christ comes quickly, a common way of ending the revelations contained therein.\(^{68}\) The preface to the Doctrine and Covenants (Section 1), explicitly declares that the Restoration has taken place in order that faith be increased, God’s everlasting covenant be established, and the gospel proclaimed to all the world so that Lord may come down and “and reign in their midst.”\(^{69}\)

\(^{65}\) Essentially three books: the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.

\(^{66}\) Mormon 8:35

\(^{67}\) See 3 Nephi 21.

\(^{68}\) For example, see the end of sections 2, 33, 34, 35, 36, and 39. This phrase or idea (“I come quickly”) exists in numerous other revelations both as an ending and a central message.

\(^{69}\) See D&C 1:17–36.
The Pearl of Great Price prophesies—from both an ancient and a modern perspective—of the Second Coming of Christ.⁷⁰ Joseph took special care to “re-translate”⁷¹ Matthew 24, one of the most eschatological chapters in the New Testament. This translation, like its biblical equivalent, emphasizes the signs preceding the parousia and was later canonized by the Church as a part of the Pearl of Great Price.⁷²

*Ties to Judaism.* All of the parallels that exist between ancient Judaism and Christianity also exist between Judaism and restored Christianity. The restored church is, in many respects, considered an Old Testament church: emphasizing prophets, priesthood, temples, and a direct covenant relationship between God and his people. Also, like its early counterpart, the restored church has always been conscious of its significant ties to Judaism. Many of the Book of Mormon prophecies and the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants concern the “gathering in” of the Jews into the new and everlasting covenant established in the last days.⁷³ The Church has taken these prophecies literally and has made many attempts to actively proselytize the Jews. Joseph Smith even sent Orson Hyde, one of the Church’s early apostles, to Jerusalem to dedicate the Holy Land for the return of the Jews.⁷⁴

Furthermore, Church members see themselves as kin to the Jews, as members of the other tribes of Israel. Since the Church’s founding, members have received Patriarchal Blessings in which

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⁷⁰ See Moses 7 and JS–H 1:27–54
⁷¹ Joseph’s translation of the Bible was a spiritual, not a scholarly, process.
⁷² It is interesting to note that this eschatological chapter is the only one of Joseph’s retranslated sections of the Bible to be canonized.
⁷³ For example, see the title page of the Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 29, and D&C 45.
their lineage in the House of Israel is declared.\textsuperscript{75} The latter-day prophecies concerning the gathering that will take place preceding the Second Coming speak of the gathering of all of the House of Israel, though special emphasis is often given to the Jews and their “rejoining” of sorts with the House of Israel.\textsuperscript{76} Consequently, many members of the Church see themselves as family members who need to take the gospel to their lost (or apostate) first cousins. This service is seen as both a duty and a direct fulfillment of scriptural prophecy concerning the end of times.

Finally, the restored church sees itself in the same position as ancient Judaism, awaiting the redemption of Israel. This redemption is to take place as both Jews and the lost tribes of Israel are “gathered in.” This theme is also commonly portrayed in Mormon hymns.\textsuperscript{77} These grand events—eschatologically tied to the coming of the Messiah as prophesied in both ancient and modern scripture—will mark the setting up of a redeemed Israel as a kingdom of priests and an holy nation, with the Messiah reigning personally in their midst.\textsuperscript{78}

\textit{Literal, Imminent Parousia.} It has already been noted that much of Mormon scripture is filled with prophecies concerning Christ’s literal coming. As witnessed in the Doctrine and Covenants, the literal establishment of the city New Jerusalem with its temple—a city wherein Jesus Christ himself would dwell and reign over the earth—was crucial in the early days of the Church. The location for this city and its temple were given in

\textsuperscript{75} Patriarchal Blessings are personalized blessings given to members of restored Church who seek them. These blessings are pronounced by special priesthood holders, and many members of the Church consider these blessings as personal scripture.


\textsuperscript{77} For example, see \textit{Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints} (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 1, 6, 7, 13, 40, 54, 50, 319, and 327.

\textsuperscript{78} See Exodus 19:6 and D&C 133:25–36.
D&C 57. In Section 84, the Lord says, “Verily this is the word of the Lord, that the city New Jerusalem shall be built by the gather-
ing of the saints, beginning at this place, even the place of the temple, which temple shall be reared in this generation. For verily this generation shall not all pass away until an house shall be built unto the Lord, and a cloud shall rest upon it, which cloud shall be even the glory of the Lord, which shall fill the house.” This aspect of where in the parousia seems to be unique to Mormonism in modern times, paralleling the ancient Christian expectation that Christ would return to the exact spot of the Mount of Olives. Clearly the wording suggests an imminent occurrence of these events. Consequently, the Church took this wording literally.

Joseph Smith himself appears to have believed that the event would occur in his lifetime—from at least age seventeen he received frequent visits from heavenly messengers proclaiming the imminent nature of Christ’s coming. He often sought revelation concerning the matter. Joseph’s only answer was a vague reference to the possibility of the parousia’s occurring later in his life, if he lived so long. 79 Nevertheless, it was the subject of many of Joseph’s sermons and he often preached concerning the parousia’s imminent reality. 80

Both early and restored Christianity’s belief in an imminent parousia has made them active proselytizing churches. Ever since Samuel H. Smith, Joseph’s brother, started out on a mission immediately following the publication of the Book of Mormon, there have been missionaries of the Church going out across the world seeking converts. In John Taylor’s epithet of Joseph and his brother Hyrum, recorded as D&C 135, he writes that while alive Joseph “sent the fullness of the everlasting gospel . . . to the four quarters of the earth.” Indeed, missionaries had been sent all over the world during Joseph’s life and have since covered far more

79 This revelation is mentioned in D&C 130:14–17.
80 For numerous examples, see Dahl 619–625.
ground. There are close to sixty thousand missionaries today. There is a fervor and enthusiasm that exists in the Church concerning missionary work. This enthusiasm is reflected in both Mormon pop-culture and the sermons of contemporary church authorities.

Concerning missionary work, however, there exists one unique difference between early and restored Christianity. Many scholars have noted that early Christianity expected the end of the world, not its conversion. Mormonism, on the other hand, expects the conversion of the world preceding and as part of the end of the world. The prophet Joseph writes, “I calculate to be one of the instruments in setting up the kingdom of Daniel by the word of the Lord, and I intend to lay a foundation that will revolutionize the whole world.” Daniel 7:13-14 contains a vision of the Messiah’s coming at which point he was given a kingdom of people, nations, and languages. Joseph’s intention was to literally build such a kingdom here and now that could be turned over to the Lord at his coming. This Church was to be the stone cut out of the mountain without hands that would role to fill the whole earth.

**Historical Effects and Delay.** Despite the fervent expectation of imminent parousia, there has also existed a note of caution from the beginning: we do not know exactly when Christ will come again and we must not let expectation distract us from our work. After the revelation given as D&C 130 (in which Joseph is told that if he lives to be eighty-five he would see the face of the Son of Man) Joseph began to assume that Christ would indeed be coming back toward the end of the nineteenth century. In the

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81 LDS bookstores are now filled with various books, posters, t-shirts, bumper stickers, etc., all containing various missionary messages and logos.

82 As recent as the October 2002 General Conference, the Church has made major reforms in the missionary program in order to emphasize the sacred nature of proselytizing in preparation for Christ’s Second Coming.

early 1840s William Miller began to preach that he had calculated from biblical prophecies that the parousia would take place in 1843 or 1844. Joseph refuted his claim saying, “I also prophesy, in the name of the Lord, that Christ will not come in forty years; and if God ever spoke by my mouth, He will not come in that length of time.”

In 1835, he said “fifty-six years should wind up the scene.” Thus, although there remained an imminent expectation, that expectation began to be softened, and members of the Church began to look toward the end of the century as the long awaited end. Latter-day prophets since have all spoken of the parousia ambiguously, encouraging the Saints to prepare while warning them against overzealous expectation.

Latter-day Saint scriptures themselves, though prophesying of an imminent end, also allude to the fact that there will be a delay. Concerning the parousia, D&C 63:35 states, “And behold, this is not yet, but by and by.” After being driven out of Missouri (the place of Christ’s return) the Lord says in D&C 100:13 that “Zion shall be redeemed, although she is chastened for a little season.” Section 58 is perhaps the most explicit. Verses 3–4 speak of a time of tribulation and testing that the Church will undergo before Christ’s coming, for “the hour is not yet.” Speaking of the inheritance of the land of Zion in Missouri (this time before the Saints are driven out) in 58:44 the Lord says, “the time has not yet come, for many years, for them to receive their inheritance in this land.”

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84 Ibid., 6:254. It should be noted that Miller is a rather insignificant figure in Church history, and it should not be assumed that he helped to shape Mormon expectation of the parousia. He is mentioned here only in the context of pointing out Joseph’s belief that Christ would not be coming until at least the latter end of the nineteenth century.

85 Ibid., 2:182.

86 A perfect example of this can be seen in several of President Hinckley’s recent General Conference addresses. While specifically stating that he is not prophesying an immediate end, he has nevertheless repeatedly warned the saints to get their houses in order, making several references to Pharaoh’s dream of the seven years of plenty vs. the seven years of famine.
The saints themselves have undergone periods of intense historical expectation wherein they felt the events of the Second Coming were upon them. Then, in similar fashion to the Saints of early Christianity, they had to adjust their outlook to accommodate their error in judgment. 1830-1832 was a period of intense expectation. Numerous articles were published in the Church periodical *The Evening and Morning Star* on the subject of the Second Coming. In each edition there was a listing of various "signs of the times" that had been or were currently being fulfilled.87 Joseph Smith himself was anxious concerning such signs in the early 1830s. He records the experience of being awoken at 4 A.M. by a Brother Davis to witness a meteor shower. Watching the "stars fall from heaven" he noted that it was "a sure sign that the coming of Christ is close at hand."88 As we’ve already noted, this period of intense expectation seems to have tapered off toward the latter end of the 1830s as Joseph began to emphasize his knowledge that Christ wouldn’t come at least until Joseph was eighty-five years old.

Keith E. Norman attempts to catalogue various periods of intense expectation in Mormon history in his article “How Long O Lord: The Delay of Parousia in Mormonism.” He cites Zion’s Camp, the Civil War, and the clashes between Church leaders and the U.S. government over polygamy around the turn of the century (which coincided exactly with Joseph’s eighty-fifth birthday) all as examples of intense expectation.89 Despite the fact that in each of these periods of time there were yet signs that had not been fulfilled, the political turmoil and the threat of the destruction of the Mormon people were enough to convince many that these were the most blatant of signs and that the only solution to

87 For a discussion of this, see Glen M. Leonard, “Early Saints and the Millennium,” *Ensign* (Aug. 1979), 44.
these problems was the return of the Savior. Following each of these and other periods of tragedy (such as the Missouri expulsion and Joseph’s and Hyrum’s martyrdom) the membership of the Church underwent the same examining of the perennial questions that we listed above. Were the enemies of the Church right? Was Joseph really a fraud? Had God abandon them? Were they a fallen people? Was Christ real and really coming back? Did they perhaps fundamentally misunderstand what the parousia was?

The perennial questions, however, have not brought on a decrease in imminent expectation. Each new generation grows up convinced that they are the chosen generation to usher in the Second Advent. This message is even preached from the pulpit. Coupled with the Mormon doctrine of the pre-mortal existence, this message is often delivered in the context of the rising generation being special spirits reserved to come down to earth at this exact time so as to heroically bring about the events necessary for Christ’s second coming. At times this message is greatly exaggerated and various falsified prophetic quotes are widely circulated among members of the Church. Other manifestations of expectation are prevalent in Mormon pop-culture as well. Sensationalistic books are read and raved about. Folklore and faith-promoting rumors concerning Christ’s coming are widely popular topics of conversation. Everyone knows someone who knows someone whose Patriarchal Blessing states that some major event will happen in a few short years and the Second Coming will be ushered in. Current affairs are always interpreted as fulfillment of scriptural prophecy, often from cryptic passages in Revelation or Isaiah. Multiple and creative ways for the temples to be built in Jerusalem

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90 My mother has often noted to me that the young always think Christ will be coming within a handful of years while the old think that his coming will yet be a while. Although her observation is not true in every instance, it is a fairly astute generalization.
and Missouri are invented (at times, the stories claim that the temple is actually being built). It is common to find Latter-day Saints, old and young, discussing such things in genuine excitement and expectation.

The Essential Element of Delay. Early Christianity was established and then charged by Jesus Christ (his last message and counsel) to take the gospel to all the world. The New Testament declares our above-discussed irony of the past triumph of Jesus and his future coming. It both declares the divinity of Jesus Christ, a document of testimony to all the world, and gives instruction on how to live faithfully while awaiting the parousia. We have noted the necessary nature of this wait, of the delay in Christ’s parousia: Christianity is the kingdom set up in order to faithfully await, to be a light set up on a hill, an organization of faith and expectation. When the waiting is concluded, in a very real sense, so is the purpose of Christianity as an earthly religion.

This element of necessary delay is even more conspicuous within the Church today. Restored Christianity is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Church is set up explicitly for the purpose of preparing the earth for the parousia. It was established in the “latter days,” the days immediately prior to Christ’s Second Coming. In the Lord’s preface to the Doctrine and Covenants, Section 1, he declares that this Church has been set up specifically to be a refuge for the righteous from the “calamity” of the end of times. Missionary work is emphasized in revelations given to the Church even before its official founding. As we have already seen, Church leaders continue to emphasize this important point of missionary work. This Church is the stone that Daniel saw, cut out without hands, which will role forth to encompass the earth.

91 D&C 4, 12–17.
92 See Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual, (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 1981), 367 for numerous quotes by Church leaders concerning this point.
Thus, not only is the Church itself specifically a pre-parousia entity, it is one that has been given a detailed commission of preparation. The concept of this pre-parousia mission is a very literal one: Zion is to be built below in order to receive the Zion (the heavenly city of Enoch) that will descend from above. Christ is to have his kingdom here waiting for him when he returns. These marvelous events prophesied in scripture concerning the days immediately prior to the second coming are not to be brought about solely by heavenly powers:

And now, I ask, how righteousness and truth are going to sweep the earth as with a flood? I will answer. Men and angels are to be co-workers in bringing to pass this great work, and Zion is to be prepared, even a new Jerusalem, for the elect that are to be gathered from the four quarters of the earth, and to be established an holy city, for the tabernacle of the Lord shall be with them.93

Furthermore the Prophet Joseph declared, “We ought to have the building up of Zion as our greatest object.”94 And again:

It is left for us to see, participate in and help to roll forward the Latter-day glory . . . when the Saints of God will be gathered in one from every nation, and kindred, and people, and tongue . . . the Spirit of God will also dwell with His people . . . and all things whether in heaven or on earth will be in one, even in Christ. The heavenly Priesthood will unite with the earthly, to bring about those great purposes; and whilst we are thus united in one common cause, to roll forth the kingdom of God, the heavenly Priesthood are not idle spectators, the Spirit of God will be showered down from above and it will dwell in our midst.95

93 History of the Church 2:254, 260.
94 Ibid., 3:233.
Thus, the Latter-day waiting is to be a waiting of work, of building up Zion in preparation for Christ’s descent. Furthermore, a direct spiritual link is to continue between the work taking place on earth and the work taking place in heaven. This period of delay, of waiting-working, is the mission and content of the restored church, a vital part of its essence.

Meaning of Delay. The last quote from the Prophet Joseph Smith hints at the meaning of delay in the restored church. Responses to the delay of parousia within the Church run the same spectrum that we have already observed in early Christianity. But the message of parousia from the early days of the Church has always been one of work and of a uniting of the heavenly and the earthly. Hence, the first building that the Church built was a temple, a House of the Lord wherein the Savior could visit his people. In D&C 97:16, concerning the building of this first temple, the Lord said, “Yea, and my presence shall be there, for I will come into it, and all the pure in heart that shall come into it shall see God.” This is the great promise of temple work, a promise that has been and continues to be literally fulfilled.

Early Christianity adopted the interpretation of parousia in death, an event that will come suddenly to each Christian and for which he or she must be prepared. Death was a literal advent wherein the deceased would be confronted by their Savior. This continues to be a valid and important interpretation today. However, the message of the restored gospel is to prepare for a union with the Savior in life and not just in death. “Then I would exhort you to go on and continue to call upon God until you make your calling and election sure for yourselves, by obtaining this more sure word of prophecy, and wait patiently for the promise until you obtain it.”

Ibid., 5:389

Again, the Prophet Joseph has said, “Oh! I beseech you to go forward, go forward and make your calling
and your election sure.”97 One’s calling and election made sure means to “hear the voice [of God] declare to you, You have a part and lot in [his] kingdom,”98 to see the face of God and live, to be ushered into the heavenly presence of the Lord and have your salvation secured.99 We believe in the literal and immediate parousia of the faithful, in their union with Christ now—not just in a spiritual sense, but in a very literal and physical sense. Just as the prophets of the Old Testament, members of restored Christianity go to the “Mountain of the Lord’s House”—the temples—in order to commune with God. The event of parousia is performed ritualistically in temples all across the earth as members prepare for and strive towards its reality. Thus, regardless of when the future, physical descent of Christ to the earth will be, each of us is striving toward an immediate, physical ascent to meet with Christ in heaven.

97 Ibid., 6:365
98 Ibid., 5:403