

## THE BIBLE AND THE LAST DAYS

### I. Introduction

A. In theology it is known as the study of Eschatology. The study of *future* or *final* things. How will God wrap-up, or conclude history? Some of the subjects are: Christ's second advent, the antichrist, the great tribulation, the battle of Armageddon, the future of Israel, the millennium, the rapture, the resurrection, the final judgement, the new heavens and the new earth, etc.

### B. Importance:

1. What we believe about the future determines in a large measure how we live in the here and now. This is true both at the personal level and corporately, in that it affects how the church views its ministry in the world.

"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.* (II Pet. 3:11,12a).

2. That Christ will again return to earth is a fundamental of the faith. To deny that Christ will one day return to earth is to be less than orthodox. *I will come back...* Jn. 14:3. Christ's Second Advent is mentioned in all the great creeds.

### II. The Problem, or Crisis in Eschatology

A. It has been estimated that over one-half of the NT is about the future Kingdom, i.e., Christ's return. Critics of the Bible in the previous century, and in the 20th, therefore say: *Christ's mission was a failure since his kingdom has not been realized in two thousand years of history.* Many liberal theologians of the 19th Century and early 20th denied the inspiration of Scripture because Christ's return was predicted but never came to pass.

B. Those who believe the Bible readily agree on the fact of Christ's return, but there has been no strong consensus in church history as to how the final days (or order of events) will come about.

C. Among some Bible believers and sects there has been undue speculation and unsuccessful date-setting which has damaged the credibility of many and has harmed the reputation of the church as a whole. Some previous and current examples:

1. The book: *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Occur in 1988.*

2. Each Psalm contains hidden prophecy for that particular year. For example: Psalm 90 contains hidden prophecy for events that will occur in 1990, from Psalm 91, events for 1991, etc.

3. God allowed the Hubble telescope to be flawed because the New Jerusalem is now approaching the earth and God did not want it to be revealed at this time!

4. The recent Blood Moons, a particularly rare celestial phenomenon was viewed by one pastor of a megachurch as a sign of the end times.

### III. Interpreting Prophecy

A. The liberal approach. Because of its naturalistic bias, prophecy must be demythologized. It holds to non-

literal spiritual fulfillment. Prophecy (apocalyptic literature) is studied only as a form of ancient literature.

- B. The evangelical approach. Since they believe the Bible is a supernatural book, fore-telling the future is no problem. The problem is interpretative. What method of interpretation can I use to arrive at the meaning intended by the original authors?

1. Some prerequisites:

- a. Knowledge of the historical situation. What crisis or problem caused the writer to pen this book? This involves a great deal of historical study of both internal, or biblical sources, and external, or non-biblical sources. Archaeology plays a key role here.
- b. Language requirements. To be an accurate interpreter one must know the original languages and what the words meant at that time, and in the context of the passage.
- c. The symbolic language of prophetic passages must be studied in the light of the Bible's overall usage of the symbols. Take the symbol of leaven for example; it does not always mean the same thing. To be an accurate interpreter, a significant grasp of the Bible as a whole is necessary. For example, much of the symbolism in The Revelation is borrowed from the books of Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel (and now we know from non-canonical books known as *The Psuedepigrapha*).
- d. When studying prophecy it is helpful to have a grasp of historical theology, that is, what the great theologians of the church have taught. This is, of course, not an infallible rule. Even the great ones have made errors, but it should make us precede with caution when we oppose them!

2. Why the differences? Several plausible explanations:

- a. Different levels of knowledge. Let's face it, some have a better grasp of the original languages than others. The same goes for the historical situation, etc.
- b. Theological bias has a great deal to do with the interpretative scheme we use.
- c. World events and the cultural climate often influence our interpretation of Scripture. For example: Augustine saw Christianity become the official religion of the Roman empire. He naturally thought Christ would return at the end of the millennium. During WWII many saw Hitler as the antichrist because of his persecution of the Jews.

IV. Three Main Interpretive Schemes for Interpreting Prophecy

- A. They are based upon how they answer the following questions:

1. What is the nature of the kingdom?
2. Will the Church be successful in evangelizing the world?
3. How does Israel and the Church relate to each other in God's overall plan?
4. Will Israel be revived as a nation to receive literally the promises made to David?
5. Will there be a literal 1000 year reign of Christ on earth as revealed in Rev. 20:6?

- B. Three General Views of the Future:

1. Postmillennialism: Christ will come after the millennium or Golden Age. The millennium is generally not seen as a literal 1000 year period. One form holds that the present church age will culminate in the entire world becoming *Christianized*. When this occurs a golden age will commence for 1000 years (or longer) after which Christ will come. This view tends to be very optimistic about the mission of the Church (*the gates of hell will not prevail...* Matt. 16:18). Many of the great hymns of the church have a very strong postmillennial flavor.
2. Premillennialism: Christ will return to earth and establish a literal 1000 year kingdom on earth. A literal nation of Israel will be prominent among the nations. (See Rom 11).
3. Amillennialism: There is no literal 1000 year millennium followed by Christ's return, only the last judgement followed by the eternal state which begins after Christ returns to judge the earth. One variation of this view holds that the eternal state is a literal kingdom on earth, the New Earth, that is.

#### V. Some Perspectives on the Study of Eschatology

- A. The purpose of Prophecy in Scripture is not to simply satisfy our curiosity about future things, but to motivate individual Christians to holy living and for the Church to keep a proper focus on its task in the present world.
- B. The doctrine of eschatology should be one of the last things new believers try to master.
- C. Except for the belief that Christ will return again to the earth in bodily form, various schemes of the last days should not be held with a rigid dogmatism, nor should they be a point of fellowship. In other words, how we interpret the identity of the beast in Rev. 13 should not be the grounds for determining with whom we fellowship. The grounds of fellowship are given in II John.
- D. We must be careful not to interpret prophecy in light of current events, which some call *newspaper exegesis*.
- E. Rather we must be assiduous students of the Word, always laboring to find the author's original intent as it was meant for its original readers.
- F. Never hold views concerning the Last Days in such a rigid manner that we are not willing to listen to new ideas or be open to new discoveries from scholarly research. Occasionally, read a prophetic book of the Bible (like Revelation) as though you have never read it before.
- G. Be careful not to romanticize the modern state of Israel. Rabbinical Judaism is a false cult and not a valid way to God. This view does not make one anti-Semitic. Old Testament Judaism, while true does not go far enough. The New Covenant announced in Jer. 32-33 is now in affect.
- H. As much as possible, attempt to be aware of modern biblical studies which challenge us to re-think old and cherished prophetic interpretations. For example:
  1. New studies indicate that there are strong arguments that all the books of the New Testament were written before 70 A.D. including the book of Revelation. This makes a great deal of difference as to how the message related to the original readers.
  2. New studies from the Dead Sea Scroll material is shedding much new light on the theological beliefs in Palestine in the early First Century. For example, scholars believe the writer of the book of Revelation was familiar with the non-canonical book of Enoch, which is a book of similar genre. Jude, the half-brother of Jesus, quotes from two of these books, including this book of Enoch, and Peter in his Epistles,

is obviously acquainted with them. See Jude 4, and 9.

3. We need to re-think the importance of Christ's curse on the nation of Israel in Matthew 23, and the events which He prophesied in Matt. 24. Perhaps the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. plays a more significant role than we think in such NT phrases like "the last Days" and why the warnings in Hebrews were so urgent to the original readers.

- I. Whatever we believe about prophecy it must never become a means of escapism to the extent that it keeps us from the task God has called us to do. We are to be *salt* and *light* in the world. Salt in the shaker does no good whatsoever, nor does light under bushel remove darkness.

### **Recommended reading list for the study of prophecy:**

Alcorn, Randy. *Heaven*.

Bingham, D. Jeff, and, Kreider, Glenn R. *Eschatology: Biblical and Practical Approaches*.

Brower, Kent E. And Elliot, Mark. eds. *Eschatology in Bible & Theology*.

Clouse, Robert G. ed. *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*.

DeMar, Gary. *Last Days Madness*.

Erickson, Millard J. *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*.

Evans, Craig A, and Flint, Peter. ed. *Eschatology, Messianism, and the Dead Sea Scrolls*.

Gentry, Kenneth L. Jr. *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*.

Gentry, Kenneth L. Jr. *The Beast of Revelation*.

Grenz, Stanley J. *The Millennial Maze*.

Gundry, Stanley N. ed. *The Rapture: Three Views*.

Hoekema, Anthony A. *The Bible and the Future*.

Hoyt, Herman A. *The End Times*.

Ladd, George eldon. *The Last Things*.

LaSor, William Sanford. *The Truth About Armageddon: What the Bible Says About the End Times*.

Storms, Sam. *Kingdom Come*.

Travis, Stephen H. *Christian Hope & The Future*.