

Testing the Spirits of our Times

Christ is coming back! How He is coming is another story. What does the Bible say about wars, rumours of wars, persecution of Christians, the rise of false teachers, famines, earthquakes, and the future of the world? How do we interpret Biblical prophecies? The most difficult problem is the interpretation of prophecy; it has divided both theologians and interpreters in warring camps. There is no greater opportunity for daring speculations than end time prophecies. Evangelicals, the majority of whom hold millennial views of one sort or another, talk about the end times as that sequence of events predicted in the Bible which will lead to the end of time as we know it and the establishment of a millennial kingdom.

Preoccupation with the "end times" is understandable. In times of world crisis, promises of a peaceful future, shrouded in prophetic language and visions, are appealing. There is a longing for the end of the world, which seems to go from one crisis to another. With things heating up in the Middle East, some believe that end-time events could possibly take place and break forth right now. In a *Newsweek* interview, Tim LaHaye of the *Left Behind* fame was asked about predictions concerning the coming of Christ. He answered, "I have often said that no one knows the day nor the hour that Christ will come, but no generation had so many signs of the times as our generation. We have more reason to believe that Christ could come in our lifetime than any generation before us." But speculation about the end times is a vice and not a virtue. We must have our spiritual feet planted on the solid ground of Scripture and history, lest we get carried away by all kinds of predictions. Remember that our generation is not the first to be anxious about the end times! As the nineteenth century drew to its close, many pulpits in England rang with apocalyptic warnings. Many believed the end of all things was at hand. By the early nineties, Rev. Baxter was quite convinced that the day of final doomsday was fast approaching. Christ would return at an appointed hour in 1896, preceded by the rapture of one hundred and forty-four thousand selected Christians. But when the hour arrived, most of the chosen, apparently, preferred to linger on earth for at least another year that they might join the festivities of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

Dispensationalism

By the turn of the twentieth century, premillennial dispensational theology provided evangelicals with a clear method and program with which they could effectively oppose theological liberalism. This "new" theology has its roots in Great Britain and is associated with John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). Darby, the founder of the Plymouth Brethren denomination, brought his dispensational views to North America, where he became enormously popular among evangelicals. He divided human history into different ages, or dispensations, and insisted that Jesus would return at any moment to rescue the true believers from the apocalyptic destruction awaiting the unrighteous.

Here Darby departs from the mainstream premillennialists. He taught that the purpose of the first "second coming" is not the destruction of God's enemies and the last judgement, but the secret rapture of the church. Between the first and second coming there will be a mass conversion among the Jews. Christ will return the second time after seven years of worldwide tribulation to establish a dominion on earth based in Jerusalem. The saints will reign on earth with Christ. This period will end. Jesus will hand the Kingdom to His Father and God shall be all in all.

According to dispensationalists, the Old Testament prophecies are to receive their literal fulfillment in the restored nation of Israel rather than in the church. The church has no stock in the present world. The former Dallas Theological Seminary (founded in 1924) president, John Walvoord makes a clear distinction between Israel and the church. According to him and other dispensationalists, the word "Israel" cannot be applied to the New Testament church, and the word "church" is not found in the pages of the Old Testament. They insist that God's redemptive plan focuses on national Israel, with provision made for Gentiles, during the church age. The latter began at Pentecost, an event that also marked the end of God's dealings with Israel as His special people. Since Israel has become a nation, in fulfillment of God's promise to the descendants of Abraham, the next event to occur on the prophetic time line is the rapture. Jesus does not rule today. He is going to become the Lord of all in the millennial age. Today the world is under the dominion of the "prince of this world", Satan.

This literal interpretation of Old Testament has some interesting implications. For example, in his *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, J. Barton Payne claims that prophecies refer to a literal future temple and its accompanying sacrifices. The millennium is thus marked by the Old Testament temple worship and animal sacrifices to commemorate the redemptive work of Christ. In *The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times*, Charles Dyer argues that one key element in God's program of end time activities will be the re-establishment of the literal rebuilt city of Babylon as a world power, when wickedness will again occupy the 'city of man.' He says that this anti-Christ capital city will be destroyed at the end of the tribulation period.

Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1843-1921)

The man most responsible for the popularization and spread of dispensationalism was C.I. Scofield, an American who had pursued a law and political career before he became involved in evangelistic work. In the 1880s, he became enamoured with Darbyism (as dispensationalism was sometimes called). It helped him explain why society all around him seemed to be in such disarray. He propagated his views through several means. He became a fixture on the Bible conference circuit and established a correspondence course. He was convinced that the Bible is a closed book to all except for those who possess a right understanding of dispensationalism.

The most enduring tool for spreading his views was the *Scofield Reference Bible*, first published in 1909. It had both the King James Version as text and extensive notes throughout, coupled with maps, charts, and dispensational headings. The headings and

the notes were woven in with the text itself, which made it appear as if this teaching was self-evident and indeed rose directly from the text. The Scofield Bible sold millions of copies.

The Rapture

The secret rapture of the church before the Day of the Lord is a key dispensationalist doctrine. In his address at the *New York Congress on Prophecy, November 1-8, 1942*, Rev. W. M. Robertson notes that the word "rapture" does not occur in Scripture any more than the terms "Trinity" or "substitution," but like these terms, it expresses Scriptural truth. The English word means "to transport to a state of happiness" and it comes from a Latin word rapio, "to seize suddenly", or "to snatch away". He refers to 1 Thess. 4:17 as a proof text. He argues that the rapture of the saints is therefore neither a pious imagination nor a theological invention. "***It is plainly the revealed hope of the people of God in this age.***" (Italics mine). According to this rapture doctrine, Jesus will return for His saints, though He will not actually touch the earth, since this is not the visible second coming. Rather, at His appearing every true Christian, whether living or dead, will be supernaturally transformed, meet Him in the air, and ascend into heaven with Him. This event is held to be imminent, for it can take place at any moment. But there is disagreement, sometimes heatedly, over when the rapture will occur. While most believe that it will occur before the great tribulation (pre-tribulationists), others think it will take place during the tribulation (mid-tribulationists) and still others believe the Church will endure the tribulation before being taken up to heaven (post-tribulationists).

The rapture scenario is dramatic. The true believers will be taken up to glory before the last judgment comes upon the world, which is in the power of the evil one. In a twinkling of an eye, the saints will be taken up to heaven, their earthly possessions left behind. Charles Dyer asks, "Can you imagine the effects on our country if over 28 million people – in industry, government, the military, business, agriculture, education, medicine and communications – disappear? That is approximately double the entire population of New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston all rolled together."

But careful reading of Scripture shows there is no theology of the rapture as dispensationalists understand it. The elect will not be taken up to heaven, escaping the great tribulation. In fact, more Christians have suffered from persecution in the last century than in any previous century. The church of the last generation will go through the fire of persecution, as every other generation of Christians has had to do. There will be suffering and martyrdom, just as there was in the time when the apostle John wrote Revelation. This is why Jesus' comfort in Mark 13:20 is not that we will be spared tribulation, but that God has shortened its time for the sake of the elect people of God, which clearly refers to the followers of Jesus.

Hal Lindsey (b. 1930)

Another popularizer of dispensationalism is Hal Lindsey. He prophesied in 1970 in his *The Late Great Planet Earth* that Gog (USSR) and Magog (Iran) would attack Israel.

This book became a best-seller overnight. With one eye on the Bible and one toward the daily news, Lindsey unleashed a wave of end-times frenzy. He argued that the world was poised for a cataclysm, literally "of biblical proportions," after which Christ would return to reign for a thousand years. He calculated that these things ought to occur within forty years – a "biblical generation" – of the founding of the modern state of Israel in 1948. But 1988 came and went without the coming of our Lord to begin His millennial reign. Lindsey's critics were quick to note the apparent contradiction of a man investing heavily in real estate, while proclaiming the end of the world. Undaunted, he continues to claim himself as one of the "leading experts on biblical prophecy."

Jack Van Impe (b. 1931)

Jack Van Impe, a televangelist known as "The Walking Bible," concentrates on prophetic and apocalyptic texts. In *Perhaps Today* (Jan/Feb. 2005), a publication of Jack Van Impe Ministries, Jack and his wife Rexella argue in a sensational article, *Another Hitler Rising*, that there will be a revived Roman empire that will be the last political empire to reign on this earth before Jesus comes back. Rexella says, "Jack and other prophecy experts are sure that the European Union is that end time empire, which will become the strongest economic and political power that has ever existed."..."Any day now a great and powerful World Leader is coming through the door of the European Union to trigger the events of the last days. Watch and be ready." She says this man will pretend to be the greatest friend of Israel and the world.

Left Behind Novels

To the writing of end time literature, there seems to be no end. When it comes to describing the end of the world, millions of readers are convinced that the *Left Behind* novels, written by Jerry Jenkins and preacher Tim LaHaye, contain the gospel truth. The twelve novels, backed by sequels, movies, video games and comic books, have sold millions of copies. Not only Christians, but also non-Christians read these novels. For many non-Christians, the apocalyptic message of *Left Behind* and orthodox Christianity are now tightly linked. But instead of historic orthodoxy, they have been fed a "pop version" of "premillennial dispensationalism." Most of the Christian readers say that they read these books to compare what they say about the end times with what the Bible says, or because the series explain the "events described in the book of Revelation in an understanding way." In the wake of the enormous success of the *Left Behind* series, and in view of how Biblically illiterate our culture and even the church has become, it is not surprising that dispensational theology continues to be popular, especially in the light of the Hizbollah-Israeli war, and America's involvement in stressful wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

The Reformed Perspective

When Jesus comes back, there won't be a secret rapture that the dispensationalists champion so militantly. All the pointless speculation about the timing of the rapture or the return of Christ is an exercise in futility. Our Lord will not come according to our time

table, He will come like a thief in the night. The date of His return is totally unknown. Our task is not to figure out God's blueprint for the future. Only the Heavenly Father knows when His Son is coming again (Matt. 24:36). Many times prophecy "experts" have been mistaken. As I have shown, their predictions contradict each other. I am also thinking of the many "sure" identifications of the anti-Christ. They range from Napoleon, Mussolini, Hitler, to Henry Kissinger. The "experts" seem to forget that Biblical prophecy is complex and cannot be figured out by a sorting system, multi-coloured charts, or a string of chain references. Why turn predictions regarding the Second Coming of Christ into a prophetic jigsaw puzzle and discredit the hope of the Church? When "literal" interpretations of passages turn out to be wrong or nothing happens on the predicted date of Christ's return, Christians are embarrassed and the credibility of the Gospel is damaged. Our blessed hope is our Lord's glorious appearing. The apostle Paul looked for one climactic visible future event, the return of Jesus Christ, *the blessed hope*. It is this blessed hope which enables us to live godly and upright lives in this present age.

Be Alert

The Bible urges us to live a godly life and always be ready for our Lord's return. Our strength is not in prophetic conferences, no matter how exciting they may be. We can't withdraw from this world. If we are certain about His coming and seek to put faith and love into action here and now by the active hope we have in Christ's return, then we are indeed spiritually ready for the day of the Lord. But if we are motivated by prejudice, tearing down or criticizing each other, harbour unkind thoughts and an unforgiving spirit, then the truth of our Lord's coming has failed to make an impression upon our thinking. But if we are spiritually prepared, it really doesn't matter what happens in the Middle East in terms of our salvation. It may be that nothing is going on in the Middle East when He comes. Won't that be a surprise? Well, not to those who are ready.

How shall we live as we wait for the Lord's return? Not knowing the date of His return calls for watchfulness. We must always be alert. This is more than a theological debate; it is developing a Christian life style, a watchful attitude. We should not panic and prepare for some future disaster. We don't need to be anxious about tomorrow. The entire future, both of our own and that of the world, are in the hands of our sovereign God. He has already determined the time of His Son's return. Our call is not the deciphering of God's secret counsel, but to fulfill our present duty. While we confidently look forward to our Lord's coming again, our future hope may not be an excuse for social inaction or a careless lifestyle. Lord Shaftesbury, the 19th century English evangelical social reformer, said near the end of his life, "I do not think that in the last forty years I have lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by the thought of our Lord's return." That conviction was obviously one of the strong motives behind his social programs.

With the hope of Christ's return in mind, we are called to honour our Lord in every square inch of life, in the arts, sciences, state and society. We continue to pray, watch, work, establish Christian schools, businessmen's associations and labour unions. We are to be light and salt in God's world. The Bible says, "For the grace of God that brings

salvation...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 Saviour, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:11-13).

How Eager Are We?

Why leave it to dispensationalist prophecy speculators to speak about the return of our Lord? Of course, Reformed Christians should also be future oriented. As kingdom citizens, we should eagerly look forward to the return of our Saviour and King, Jesus Christ. When a Dutch citizen during the second World War didn't long for the return of the Queen in exile, he was called a poor citizen. When we no longer earnestly expect our Lord's return, we can't be called solid Kingdom citizens. We must confess that the expectation of our Lord's return is not as strong as it should be among Reformed Christians. Are we longing to see the crown of God's redemptive work, the return of our Lord? He can come any time. It can also take ages for us, who count minutes, hours, and days. But for the One for Whom a thousand years is like a day, His coming is at hand. He will be soon standing at our door. Therefore, the Spirit and the Bride say, "Come Lord Jesus, Come Soon" (Rev. 22:17).

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