

Millennial Fervour

As the year 2000 is fast approaching, the end of the world speculations shows people's anxiety about the future. Sophisticated moderns are as uneasy now as when the first millennium arrived. Ludicrous theories are promoted while Biblical prophecy is being debunked as myth. Some worry about elderly Nazis hiding beneath the South Pole plotting to take over planet earth with help of space age creatures. Environmental doomsayers predict that pollution will cause the end of the world in the next century. Cultural commentator Christopher Lasch says, "As the twentieth century approaches its end, the conviction grows that many other things are ending too. Storm warnings, portents and hints of catastrophe haunt our times. Books on the end times have become popular. The vague and very difficult to understand prophecies of Nostradamus (1503-1566), French astrologer and occultists, are consulted by numerous people even today. As we approach the year 1999, Nostradamus' riddle will give them the jitters:

In the year 1999 and seven months
The great King of Terror will come
from the sky.

He will bring back to life the great king of the Mongols.
Before and after war reign happily unrestrained.

And North American Christians are also fixated with the end of the world scenarios. Prophetic conferences are well attended.

Our generation is not the first to be anxious about the end times. When the year 1000 approached there probably was no mass hysteria as some historians claim. But there was a widespread concern that the end may be near. For example, Louis Berkhof, in his "History of Christian Doctrines," confirms that in the tenth century there was a widespread expectation of the approaching end of the world ... it was associated with the idea of the speedy coming of the antichrist.

Christian art often chose its themes from eschatology (the branch of theology, which deals with the final end of man and of the world). The hymn "Dies Irae" sounded the terrors of the coming judgment, painters depicted the end of the world on the canvas, and Dante gave a vivid description of hell in his "Divina Commedia."

Although date setting and sensationalism cannot be supported by Bible texts, the return of Christ is clearly foretold. The delay of his return does not mean that Christians have given up hope. Each generation of Christians has kept this hope alive. But some Christians did pray for a delay of Christ's return, not because they did not want him to come again. They were burdened for the people who had not heard the Gospel as yet. For example, the African theologian Tertullian (d.c.225) prayed for the delay of the end so that the Gospel may spread to the whole world.

What of the future? God is in control of history. Christians do look forward to the triumphant return of Christ. He will come suddenly. The Bible says, "...about times and dates we do not need to write you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:1 f). In the midst of all the turmoil and dangers of our time Christians live by faith not by sight. With the eyes of faith they are looking forward to a glorious future.

Does the Christian hope lead to escapism? Some Christians have adopted a short-term perspective on life. They say, "if Christ's coming is imminent, why bother participating in politics, economics, or engineering? And if there is no future, why bother studying history. What good will it do if the end is near? And why then bother with pursuing Christian higher education, or dedicate yourself to the practise of the law, or psychology, or computer science?" This view misunderstands the Christian hope.

Christians are servants of the Lord in all that they do, while eagerly anticipating Christ's prompt return. The entire future, both our own and that of the world, is in the hands of our sovereign God, and He has not given us specific details of when the coming will be. Someone wrote, "in view of that, perhaps the best policy is this: Plan your life as though Christ will not be coming in your lifetime; live your life as though He is coming today." The Bible is clear that Christians ought to be like salt and light in God's world. With reference to the second coming 2 Peter 3:11-12 states, "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." In Titus 2:11-13 we read; '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 of the blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.'