

The End of the World and the Bible

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Many people believe the world is approaching its end. Some think it will be destroyed by a nuclear or biological holocaust. Others believe some uncontrollable disease might arise because of overpopulation or pollution. Others fear a cosmic disaster, like a large meteor or a solar flare, or a hostile alien invasion, will one day bring our planet to ruin. One “think tank” annually presents a clock that shows how late they believe the hour to be. Recently, the time was set at five minutes until midnight. But, does the Bible address this subject? Is this earth doomed? If so, will this occur by man’s hand, by natural disaster, or by some outside force? This Article investigates these questions.

There are two primary eschatological (end times) views in mainline Christianity. One view arises from **Covenant Theology** and the other from **Dispensational Theology**. These two systems of interpretation affect several areas of doctrine and practice in a general way, but the differences show up most markedly in their “End Times” teaching. In an attempt to fairly address this subject, I will **first** identify the broad planks of both systems. **Please realize** there are factions under the broad umbrella of each system. The **second part** identifies the common teachings of both systems - what they agree on. The **third part** addresses the primary differences between both systems. The **forth part** discusses the root cause of these differences.

Broad Planks

Covenant Theology maintains there is only one Covenant (agreement) between God and man. It is a **faith covenant**. Covenant theologians developed a concept of “progressive revelation.” From Genesis through Revelation, God **progressively** revealed more and more of His will, ways, and wants. People have always been called to respond **by faith** to whatever level of information they had. This faith response, or lack of it, has always determined one’s relationship and standing with God. People of every age are either believers or unbelievers. Race and nationality are non issues.

Dispensational Theology emphasizes distinct historical periods when God implements a particular agreement - a unique agreement - with a particular group or person. This forms a Dispensation. Each Dispensation has its own required response for those under it. Some teach there are three (3) Dispensations while others say ten (10), but the most common teaching identifies seven (7). In that dominant faction, we are currently in the sixth (6th) Dispensation - the Church Age. In this system, Israel plays a major role in the end times.

If we first examine **common teachings** between the Covenant and Dispensational theologies, the importance of their differences can then be ascertained more accurately. I am deliberately targeting agreement in the “End Times” area. Adherents to either of the factions agree in much more than what is listed below.

Common Teachings

The Person of Christ

Both systems place Jesus Christ as the One before whom all end time events conclude. He will physically return to earth. He will conduct the Final Judgement. Everyone who has ever lived will be resurrected and the spirit/soul will be reunited with the body. These bodies will be indestructible. Every deed, word and thought will be accounted for. Believers will be pardoned for wrongdoings (by the blood of Christ), and rewarded for service. Unbelievers have no such

hope. The Judgement is followed by an eternally fixed state, body and soul, in heaven or hell.

Condition of the World before Christ Returns

The world will be in general moral decay before Jesus returns. Like Noah's day, violence will fill the earth. Like Sodom and Gomorrah, homosexuality will be prevalent (Gen 6:5,11 and 19:1-29 with Lk 17:22-35. When homosexuality is in the open, all other sin behaviors are in full bloom. God's wrath is on the way - at least for that society [Ps 9:17 and I Cor 10:11]. This is why Christians resist open homosexuality.)

The Destiny of This Earth and Universe

Both systems agree that Jesus is currently preserving our world. It is being reserved for fire. The heavens and earth will be melted down and recreated (II Pet 3:7-13). The new heavens and earth will be eternal and very different from our current order. There will be no decay (Ro 8:19-22) and no longer any curse (Gen 3:17-19 and Rev 22:3). There will be no need for the sun or the moon's light (Rev 21:23) and yet, there will be no nighttime (Rev 21:1,25). Death will no longer exist. Mourning, crying and pain will pass away (Rev 21:4). All animals will peacefully coexist (Isa 11:6-9). Only righteousness will exist (II Pet 3:13 and Rev 21:8,27) with Jesus visibly ruling this active eternal state (Rev 22:5). The coming marvels are incomprehensible (Rev 21:24 and I Cor 2:9).

These are just a few **of the many** points of agreement between the Covenant and Dispensational theologies. These are substantive. Differences center primarily on the *specific events* leading to the final Judgement.

Primary Differences

Dispensational Theology (in most of its factions) makes a sharp distinction between Israel and the Church and believe the prophecies to ancient Israel must still be fulfilled. The future of the nation Israel is very prominent in this system (however, **Historic premillennial Dispensationals** do not make as sharp a distinction between Israel and the New Testament Church. They see many of the promises to Israel as **conditional promises** that Israel failed to attain. Many of those promises now fall to the New Testament Church). **Premillennial, pretribulation Dispensationals** believe the rapture of the Church is the next imminent event. This is when all believers are taken out of the world at the same moment. The earth is then void of all Christians and the Great Tribulation of seven (7) years begins (however, **Historic, premillennial Dispensationals** are **posttribulation**, meaning they believe the rapture of the Church and Christ's return occur at the same time. So ... the Church goes through the Great Tribulation). During the Great Tribulation, many horrible events occur. They include wars and persecutions, celestial disasters (a meteor, scorching heat, etc.), diseases, and natural disasters (huge hailstones, fire, volcanoes, earthquakes, etc.). See Revelation 6:1-17, 8:6 - 9:21, and 15:1 - 16:21. Many are brought on by man, some are brought by angels (aliens to us), and some of these disasters are direct judgements from God. During the Tribulation, Israel becomes very prominent. The Temple has been rebuilt and the sacrificial system reinstated. A revived Roman Empire arises forming a great economic and militaristic force. It is headed by the beast (Antichrist?) and a false prophet who displays great supernatural acts. During the Tribulation (halfway point) the Antichrist will set up his image in The Temple. This idolatry will cause a great uproar in Jerusalem followed by a great persecution of the Jews. In this distress, 144,000 Jewish evangelists arise (having recognized Jesus as the Messiah) and turn hoards of Gentiles to Christ. By the end of the seven (7) years, the armies of the world will gather in the valley of Armageddon

to crush Israel. China even amasses a two-hundred million man army. Jesus then physically returns and crushes these armies. Babylon (the revived Roman Empire?) falls and the Antichrist and false prophet are damned. The Millennium (1000 year reign of Christ) then begins. Satan is bound, but at the completion of the 1000 years, he is released and instigates another rebellion which is crushed. The Final Judgement then takes place, followed by the eternal states.

Covenant Theology is simpler. For example, they maintain the world has always been in **great tribulation**. The world is simply moving to a point when God sees it like Noah's, or Sodom and Gomorrah's, time. God's patience then ends and Jesus returns for Judgement. This can happen right now. The rapture, resurrection of the dead, Final Judgement, and creation of the new heavens and earth, then occur. Everyone is then placed in his/her fixed, eternal state. **Concerning the Millennium**, they do not recognize a future, literal 1000 year rule of Christ. While referred to as Amillennialists (no millennium), they are actually, "Realized Millennialists." They maintain Jesus rules now. The Millennial rule began at the Resurrection (or before), and continues (See Jn 13:3). The 1000 year reign of Rev 20:4 is symbolic for Christ's current, and complete, reign. **Concerning the nation Israel**, they believe the true Israel is made up of all the people of faith. Christ came through the flesh Israel, but the true Israel has always been, and continues to be, made up of all believers regardless of nationality. Therefore the current nation of Israel is no more special than any other nation.

"Birth Pangs"

There are many factions under the Dispensational umbrella. But one of Jesus' statements may be helpful here. He compared the end time events to "birth pangs" (Mt 24:8). **All** the end time positions (Covenant, Idealists, Preterists, Postmillennialists, Dispensationalists, etc.) are disagreeing over "birth pangs" (how many, what type, by whom, duration, etc.), but not on **"the birth" that is coming!** And just as a mother forgets the birth pangs once the child arrives, so also, when this age concludes, the pains will be forgotten as the redeemed will be occupied with the joys of God's eternal Kingdom (Rev 21:4).

Root Causes of the Differences

How literal is prophetic scripture to be understood? The way this is answered determines what camp of interpretation one winds up in. **Covenant Theology** treats prophetic scripture primarily as **symbolic**. **Dispensational Theology** treats prophetic scripture primarily as **literal**. Neither system is pure in their stance - it is all a matter of degree. For example, both groups agree that the Babylon of the Revelation is symbolic for some city or country or economic system, or something because everyone understands that Babylon will never be rebuilt (Jer 50:39,40). Dispensationals maintain they are still handling prophetic scripture literally because this Old Testament prophesy makes it clear that there will never be a "real" Babylon again. But what about the 7 heads and 10 horns = the revived Roman Empire (Rev 13:1), or the weeks of Daniel = years (Dan 9:24-27), or Gog and Magog = Russia and Moscow (Rev 20:8)? Even the most literal of the Dispensationals acknowledge many symbols in prophetic scripture - in both the New and Old Testaments. Historic Premillennial Dispensationals even think the 1000 year reign of Revelation 20 is to be understood symbolically. So the real question is this: how do we know what prophetic scripture is **symbolic** and what is **literal**? I have no answer for this, but here are three important observations.

1) God knows what is literal and what is symbolic. He may choose to grant insight to some Christians, but it is clear that many are teaching what they believe God has taught them, but indeed has not. For those who are not **sure** of being granted special insight into this type of

scripture, it may be best to become familiar with all the various positions, without committing to any. Then see how things develop if you are around for it. I think this is the Pantheist position. It will all pan out in the end.

2) What appears clearly literal may not be. The classic example involves John the Baptist and the prediction about Elijah in Malachi 4. It is clearly stated that Elijah was to come “before the great and terrible day of the Lord.” When Jesus was quizzed on this, He stated, “Elijah already came” The disciples then understood **this prophesy was referring to John the Baptist** (Mt 17:10-13)! The New Testament reinterpreted this Old Testament prophecy as one coming in the “**spirit and power of Elijah**” (Lk 1:17). If one is a literalist, John the Baptist **cannot be** the fulfillment of Malachi 4. Therefore, Jesus **is not** the Messiah. And even if Elijah is one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11, that does not change the fact that Jesus identified John the Baptist as Malachi’s Elijah. The point is this: what **appeared to be a literal prophecy** in the Old Testament turned out to be **symbolic**. There was no hint this was symbolic prophecy. If God can reveal **after the fact** that an apparently literal prophecy was indeed symbolic, does He have the authority to do that again? If He can do that with Malachi, can He do that with other Old Testament prophecies? What about New Testament prophecies? The answer is obvious. This calls for great caution when interpreting prophetic scripture. In light of this, one wonders if there is any room for dogmatism in prophecy.

3) Prophetic scripture creates a dilemma for the Christian. The Bible’s primary purpose is communication. Its information is more important than anything else in existence. But what good is it if it doesn’t mean what it says? **That is the dilemma.** Many Christians do not want to accept **any** ambiguity in Scripture. Ambiguity is weakness. That is why people gravitate toward dogmatic preachers who have all the Bible answers. That is a secure environment with no gray - all is black or white. But two unfortunate scenarios arise from this. First, those under this type of dogmatism tend to cling to, and propagate, what the “leader” teaches without questioning it. Second, if the dogmatism **is** questioned, the questioner is soon ostracized.

Most Christians have only been exposed to one “End Times” teaching. Often, they do not **even know** other systems of interpretation exist. Usually they do not even know the presuppositions of their own system, much less hear of the weaknesses of their interpretations. Over the years, many Christians, and churches, have divided over this issue. Why didn’t God simply state the entire end times scenario in absolute clarity? He knows the end from the beginning, so why didn’t He just give unmistakable names and dates? Why the riddles? It may be that this area of scripture is **a testing ground** to see who will grant liberty for diversity on this nonessential doctrinal element. Therefore, those who are approved in Christ and those who are factious (and ultimately outside of Christ) may be exposed (I Cor 11:19).

Conclusion

One of these eschatological systems may be correct, or more correct, than the others. But they can’t all be right. But even with the very different beliefs, they all **do** agree on the most important of points. This area of study is interesting and instructive. It is my hope this Article has been helpful. May God grant insight and balance to all who seek to know more about, “*The End of the World and the Bible.*” Lord bless you.

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