

Apologia: What Lutherans Believe about the End Times

By Ron Millard

Introduction:

The idea of the end of the world or the invasion of Planet Earth by extraterrestrial beings has repeatedly been the topic of popular films. Fear, confusion, and uncertainty are common feelings associated with thoughts on Jesus Christ's second coming. We have heard so much about signs and wonders that will lead up to Christ's second coming that it's easy to get confused as to what the Word of God actually tells us. Another common difficulty is that when thinking about Christ's second coming, it's easy to be caught up in ideas about how it will take place. One can imagine Jesus as if in an old western movie where the damsel in distress is tied up and placed upon the railroad tracks while an approaching train whistle is heard in the distance. Just then, with seconds to spare, Christ is seen riding on a white horse and comes down to us and sets us free right before the locomotive goes steaming by. But is this an accurate depiction?

There are so many views on what is going to happen, when it's going to happen, and in what order it's going to happen, that we can get lost. Terms like "premillennialism" and "rapture" are so commonly used by our society today that most think they are fundamental Christian views of the end times. Premillennialism is a belief that Christ will return and establish His 1000 year reign here on earth. Following this reign the "rapture," which they believe will be the collection of all living and dead believers, will occur. The problem with this view is that it's not grounded in the Word of God. Jesus said that His kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36), and this view misreads the meaning of the book of Revelation. In contrast to the above, the less common postmillennial view places Christ's second coming after (post) the 1000 year reign, which they believe we are in now and just don't realize it. They also view this 1000 year reign as an age of progress and they assume that the world is getting better and better as we near the return of Christ. This belief came about with the industrial revolution and before WWI, The Great Depression, WWII, the Holocaust, the attacks on the World Trade Center Towers, and this current economic recession. This view again misreads the book of Revelation and forgets that the wages of sin are death and decay (Romans 6:23).

Scripture Connect

We look to Scripture, not modern ideas, current events, or signs to show us God's take on the end times, but we do so with the knowledge that all Scripture points to Christ and that we should read Scripture in the style it was intended to be read. For example previously I stated that premillennialism and postmillennialism "misreads" the book of Revelation. Well, Revelation is a type of writing called apocalyptic writing which uses symbolic words to paint an image in the reader's mind, or to allow a letter to escape the Roman censoring. This was a very common writing style of the Israelites and is seen throughout the Old Testament writings as well. So, when we look at the "1000 year reign" of Revelation 20, we need to understand that the number 1000 has a very special meaning that was intended by John, the one God chose to author Revelation. The number 10 signifies perfection or completeness. It implies that nothing is wanting, that the number and order are ideal, that the whole sequence is complete. So, when God uses 1000 (that is 10 x 10 x 10) or the "most perfect—perfect reign" or "completeness of God's redemption" (John 19:30), what this means, especially as it relates to Revelation 20, is that God has already accomplished our salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ. There is nothing we need, or that God needs to add, to affect our salvation because Christ's work is perfectly finished and is completely sufficient, just as 1 Cor. 1:20 states. So, we should prevent confusion and recognize that God in some cases has chosen to convey meaning through symbolism and figures of speech.

To understand what signs and wonders will accompany the end times we should look to the Old Testament. The Old Testament believers awaited a future Redeemer who would fulfill the offices of Priest (Psalm 110:4), King (Zech 9:9), and Prophet (Deut. 18:15). The Old Testament writers look forward to the end time's kingdom of God when God's reign will become a reality experienced fully not only by Israel but by the entire world. These times of the kingdom of God would bring with it five fundamentals:

1. A Renewed Covenant which would bring forgiveness of sins and a keeping of God's promises made to Abraham, Israel, and David (Jer. 31)
2. The restoration of God's chosen repentant believing people, Israel (Ezek. 36)
3. The Outpouring of the Spirit (Joel 2; Ezek. 36; Isaiah 32,44)
4. "The Day of the Lord" would bring God's salvation to believers and wrath to unbelievers (Isaiah 12; Joel 2; Malachi 4)
5. Renewed Heaven and Renewed Earth (Isaiah 11, 32, 65, 66)

When we fast-forward to the cross and Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection we see the fulfillment of these five fundamentals. Jesus is the long awaited Redeemer who defeated sin, death, and the devil. When John the Baptist announced "repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Matt. 3:1) he was proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah and the reign of the kingdom of God. With Jesus life, death, and resurrection the five fundamentals are also realized:

1. The renewed covenant in Jesus which brings about forgiveness and God's blessings (1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 8-10)
2. God's people now receive this forgiveness and all who believe are called the "New Israel" (Gal. 3:29; Rom. 9:6-8)
3. The promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit has already come in Christ (Acts 2; 8:14-17; 10:44-48; 19:1-7; Eph. 1:13-14; Titus 3:5-6; 1 Cor. 6:19)
4. "The Day of the Lord" has arrived in Christ (Luke 19:44; Matt. 3:1-12; 2 Cor. 6:1-2)
5. The "New Israel", or Christians who are in Christ already participate in the new creation; they are, in fact, "a new creation" themselves (2 Cor. 5:17)

The Bible tells us that we are living in the most perfect—perfect reign of God, as people who have been redeemed ever since Jesus' birth, death and resurrection. Basically, the "1000 year reign" describes the current age of the church since the resurrection of Christ. Yet we Christians await the second coming of Jesus, when we will sin no more, we will dwell with the Lord along side of all believers throughout time, and we will experience creation renewed and in fellowship with God as He had designed it (2 Pet. 3:10-13; 1 Thess. 5:1-11). So we learn that we are living in the end times now but with joyful anticipation of what is to come. This is why we say we are living in the "now and not yet". All "signs" and checklists of events that have to occur have been completed through Christ. So now we are to be watchful, serve Him, and praise Him (Matt. 25; Rom. 13:11-14; 2 Thess. 2-3; James 5:7-11; 2 Pet. 3:11-18). For Jesus can return at any moment, as 1 Thess. 5:2-4 tells us, "For you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night".

Doctrinal Quotation

Christ's second coming will be one event at which time He will, in the words of Martin Luther, "raise up me and all the dead, and give unto me and all believers in Christ eternal life" (Explanation to Third Article of the Apostles' Creed). Here Jesus will return to judge, giving eternal joy to believers and condemn those who don't believe to hell, which was established for Satan and his demons (AC XVII). This is where our hope lies; by faith we have been given the gift of eternal life with Christ. We have the blessed reassurance of knowing that we will be reunited with our deceased loved ones in the almighty presence of God. We will hunger and thirst no more, we will no longer experience the pangs of sin or its consequence of death.

Luther preached in a 1522 sermon on the second coming of Jesus that, "...we are nearing our redemption from sin and evil. In this life it begins in the spirit; but since we must still battle with sin and suffer much evil, and since death is still before us, the kingdom of God is not yet perfect in us. But when once sin and death and all evil are taken away, then will it be perfect. This the last day will bring and not this life." This is the "now and not yet" idea at its best. As he wrote in *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, "the deed is done," yet we await perfection in us by God, we await Christ's return.

Application

When someone asked Martin Luther what he would do if Jesus were going to return tomorrow. His reply, "I would go plant a tree." I think what he meant by this is that people in every era, since the time of Jesus, have always thought that the end was near and it has led to people sitting around and doing nothing, or people concocting formulas to predict Christ's second coming. Now your reply might not be to plant a tree but Luther's response was long-term, looking ahead to a better tomorrow by being a servant of God. We are to keep our focus on Him, knowing we have been redeemed. The peace and joy that accompanies this fact will leave no room for fear, confusion, or uncertainty anymore.

So, we should cling to the promises of God which we received in our baptism, knowing that we are a new creation and that we need not fear or speculate about future events. Instead our hearts can leap for joy and earnestly long for the return of our Redeemer Jesus Christ.

Conclusion:

Despite the many unknowns and questions related to the end times, we do have some awe-inspiring truths. We know that all signs of the end times have been fulfilled through Christ. We know that Christ could come at anytime. We know that the number "1000" in Revelation 20 means perfect—perfect reign of God, which we have been in since Christ's birth. However, though we live in the "now", we know there is a "not yet". This time to come will bring even greater joy and peace as we will be reunited with all believers in the presence of God. It is at the resurrection that our bodies will be made perfect, we will walk with God, and realize creation renewed and in fellowship with God as He had designed it.

"Be thou comforted, little dog, Thou too in Resurrection shall have a little golden tail."—Martin Luther