

## *Is Your Eschatology Showing?* by T. A. McMahon

When I became a believer, the most popular Christian book of the day was *The Late Great Planet Earth*, written by Hal Lindsey. It stimulated a great deal of interest in biblical prophecy and, in particular, in the doctrine of the Rapture of the church. Prophecy and the Rapture were two theological concepts that were foreign to someone like me, who had been raised in the Roman Catholic Church. I couldn't figure out what either one of them was about or what they had to do with Christianity.

As I grew in my understanding of the Scriptures, however, I began to get very excited about both doctrines. The idea that Jesus could be coming back at any time to take me to heaven to be with Him was indeed a blessed hope (Titus 2:12-13). Yet only a few years later I noticed that some of my evangelical friends (and just Christians in general) didn't share my excitement—or at least the interest in it seemed to be on the wane.

Enthusiasm appeared to be fading into a blasé attitude regarding the imminent return of Jesus for His bride. Great expectation wilted to a posture of semi-confusion: "*He could be returning prior to the Great Tribulation,*" or "*He may come back for us midway through the Tribulation,*" or "*perhaps at the end of the Tribulation.*" To keep it from becoming a debate issue among evangelicals, some called themselves "*pan-tribbers,*" meaning pre-trib, mid-trib, post-trib—whatever panned out would be fine with them.

A number of things contributed to that attitude. It was recognized that the timing of the Rapture was not a doctrine that was essential for salvation, nor was a belief in it critical. It would take place for those who were truly born again—whether or not they believed that it would, and no matter when they believed it would take place. Thus the feeling among many grew that it was no big deal what one believed.

Some were also intimidated by the rise of anti-Rapture teachers, who were quite militant and aggressive in their attempts to prove that the doctrine wasn't in the Bible or even that it was heretical. The problem with these objections is that they reflect the thinking of men rather than the teaching of God, something that is always a recipe for serious problems (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25). This also raises a question (which for most evangelicals didn't seem relevant 30 years ago but today begs an answer) that is quite significant: Is your eschatology showing?

Eschatology is the study of what the Bible teaches about the End Times. It considers the events that will take place related to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ: what will precede His return, what will happen during His return, and what takes place following His coming back to earth. Obviously, since He hasn't returned yet (though some would dispute that), all of the related teachings make up biblical prophecy. So, eschatology has to do with what the Scriptures teach prophetically about the Last Days.

What, then, do I mean by asking, "*Is your eschatology showing?*"

Scripture tells us that the just (i.e., justified believers) shall live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:7, Galatians 3:1, Hebrews 10:38). This means that what we believe must be lived out in order for our

lives to be fruitful and pleasing to the Lord. If our understanding of what the Word of God says will take place in the future is not true to the Scriptures, our activities based upon that misunderstanding will be unfruitful and even spiritually destructive. I have given some reasons above why people avoid eschatological issues, to which I could add that some regard them as too far in the future to be of any practical concern or value in their lifetime. That's never been the case, and the practical realities of eschatological beliefs are becoming more evident every day.

The most prevalent eschatological teachings in church history are Premillennialism and Amillennialism. Premillennialism is the belief that Jesus Christ will return to earth in an event known as the Second Coming, which will be at the beginning of His thousand-year reign from Jerusalem. Then there is Amillennialism. Amillennialists do not believe in a literal thousand-year reign of Jesus on the earth; rather, He is said to have taken dominion over the earth right after His resurrection and now rules from heaven.

A somewhat related view is that of Postmillennialism, which declares that Christ's Second Coming will take place following His figurative millennial reign from heaven.

Is the eschatological view of Amillennialism showing? Yes, and it has been for millennia, starting back in the fourth century. Augustine, the chief architect of the major dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church, is credited with introducing Amillennialism in his book *The City of God*.

To maintain some semblance of biblical veracity, Amillennialists must spiritualize nearly all of the prophetic scriptures related to Israel and the Millennium because a literal interpretation completely contradicts their eschatology. Spiritualizing is a process of interpretation that disregards the plain sense of the text in order to ascertain a "higher" meaning, especially one that reinforces one's doctrinal bias. That approach to interpreting the Word of God, however, has had terribly destructive consequences. For example, the prophetic scriptures that refer to Israel have been spiritualized by Amillennialists to apply to the church. That false doctrine is known as replacement theology, although in replacing Israel with the church, those who teach such things major on the blessings and rarely if ever apply to the church the curses directed at Israel.

Roman Catholicism started the Amillennial ball rolling, and it was continued by the Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, with the difference, of course, being their belief that the Protestant church rather than the Church of Rome had replaced Israel. Among its other problems, replacement theology has been instrumental in sowing the seeds of anti-Semitism within Christendom. The Catholic Church published more than 100 anti-Semitic documents between the sixth and twentieth centuries (see *A Woman Rides the Beast*).

Luther, in particular, exemplified anti-Semitism among the reformers. The vicious diatribes in his writings such as *On the Jews and Their Lies*, although not based solely on his Amillennialism, were certainly dependent on it.

Calvin's Amillennialism was the basis for his attempt to create a Christian utopia in the city of Geneva, which he controlled. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Amillennialism was the breeding ground for Preterism. During the counterreformation, Jesuit priest Luis de Alcasar interpreted the prophecies of the Book of Revelation as having already been fulfilled in the first century AD. It wasn't

until the early eighteenth century, however, that Preterism, the belief that most, if not all, biblical prophecies have been fulfilled, began to be espoused by Protestants.

That, of course, was then—but what about today? Amillennialism is the most common eschatological belief among professing Christians. It is the view of Roman Catholics, Greek and Russian Orthodox churches, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Episcopalians, the Church of Christ, some Independent Baptists, and most Calvinists (with some notable exceptions). In the last quarter-century Amillennialism has spawned Christian Reconstructionism/Theonomy, a latter-day attempt similar to Calvin's failed experiment to set up the "*City of God*" in Geneva.

The goal today, however, is far more ambitious as it seeks to take dominion over the world. The Reconstructionists, aka Theonomists, are all about setting up the Kingdom of God on earth through the implementation of the Old and New Testament laws and principles. An offshoot of Reconstructionism is the Coalition On Revival, or COR. This is a movement that made some headway in the decade of the '90s through the support of leading evangelicals and through the political activism of the religious right.

Its strategy is to make the Christian worldview dominant in all "*spheres of society*:" education, science, politics, the arts, the military, and so forth. As the name more than implies, the eschatology of COR, or Coalition on Revival, is focused on bringing about worldwide revival, something that most Christians would find favorable. That may be the reason that some highly visible evangelical leaders who do not hold to an Amillennial theology—or its offspring—signed the original COR Manifesto. As one might expect, the Coalition On Revival is decidedly anti-Prophecy and anti-Rapture. The biblical doctrines of Prophecy and the Rapture do not support the agendas or goals of the Amillennial-driven COR proponents.

Though Christian Reconstructionism and the Coalition On Revival seem to be past their heyday of influence within Christendom, they are regarded by some as nothing more than a passing trend. I disagree. Trends such as the Manifest Sons of God, the Shepherding Movement, the Word/Faith teachings, the Church Growth trend, the Emerging Church Movement, and so on and so forth, come in waves much like an ocean wave, which approaches the beach, crests, and then crashes upon the sand, dumping whatever debris it carries. What's deposited by the wave sometimes sticks in the sand, while other flotsam disappears back out to sea. That's the way it is with unbiblical teachings and trends that have attracted large numbers of Christians throughout church history.

The Kingdom-dominionism of the Latter-rain, Manifest Sons of God movement that I mentioned earlier is a classic example. It started in Canada in the mid-1940s, and has ebbed and flowed throughout Christendom, particularly among Pentecostals and Charismatics. You can see its heretical teachings reflected today in so-called spiritual revivals and movements such as the Toronto Blessing, the Brownsville Revival, the Kansas City Prophets, the International House of Prayer (IHOP), and the New Apostolic Reformation.

Christian Reconstructionism influences and Coalition On Revival concepts are also making a modest yet effective return. There is a high-quality apologetics series produced by Focus on the Family titled The Truth Project (see TBC 9/11) that has been capturing the hearts and minds of young-adult evangelicals throughout the country. Significant doctrinal problems arise, however, because a major

"*scriptural worldview*" of the series, albeit unstated, is Amillennialism. Some of the key teachers are Calvinists. Reconstructionism is never mentioned; nevertheless, the central teachings of Reconstructionism and Theonomy are apparent.

Scripture clearly rejects Amillennialism. The Bible foretells that the imminent Rapture of the church, the Great Tribulation, the Second Coming, the Millennial Reign of Christ, the Dissolving of Our Present Heavens and Earth, and the Creating of a New Heaven and New Earth, will all take place, in that order. That prophetic biblical scenario, however, does not fit with Amillennialism (or Postmillennialism) or any of the other attempts to usher in the Kingdom of God (See Whatever Happened to Heaven? Resource Pages).

The true scriptural view is that the biblical events that I just listed will literally take place and need to be considered in regard to any plans or agendas of men or ministries. We should not expect worldwide revival or a global Christian transformation—not, that is, until the Millennial reign of Jesus Christ, because the Bible declares that the Last Days will be characterized by great spiritual deception in the world and apostasy in the church. Does that mean that we should bail out on the world? No. But there is no scriptural basis for believing that the world will be or can be transformed through biblical law or biblical principles.

It should be apparent that one's Amillennial beliefs have practical consequences for anyone who lives those doctrines out in his life. However, the same is true for those who claim to be Premillennialists, who believe that Jesus must return in order to begin His literal one-thousand-year reign on this earth.

What does the Bible say regarding the living out of a Premillennial eschatology? First of all, the doctrine is characterized primarily as a believer's "*blessed hope*:" "*Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ*" (Titus 2:12-13). Verse 12 indicates what our lives should be like as we are "*looking for that blessed hope*:" "*Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world;*" John, the beloved, and likely the last of the apostles to go to be with Jesus, gives us this exhortation, which no doubt he himself lived out: "*Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure*" (1 John 3:2-3).

Jesus said, "*If a man love me, he will keep my words*" (John 14:23). And in Luke 6:46, Jesus posed this question: "*And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?*" We need to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5), once and for all delivered unto the saints (Jude 1:3).

Paul wasn't simply passing on some platitudes or a take-it-or-leave-it suggestion to young Timothy when he wrote, "*But thou, O man of God, flee [sinful] things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses. I give thee charge in the sight of God...that thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Timothy 6:11-14).

Our lives need to reflect what Paul wrote as we look forward to Christ's appearing. To that John adds, *"...abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming"* (1 John 2:28). Peter not only wraps it up for us, he mentions the difficulties involved and then underscores where our hearts need to be as we look forward to an event that will be more exciting than anyone of us can imagine. He declares, *"Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls"* (1 Peter 1:6-9).

I hope and pray that our true biblical eschatology is showing. Maranatha! tbc