

We Might Be Living in the "End Times"

Dialogue 2

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By B. Patrick Williams

We might be living in the “end times;” however, what is important is that we first seek to love God and then one another. Jesus says that God’s most important commandment is to: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30-31 NIV). Our end-times beliefs must be evaluated according to this standard of love. Humility and seeing with open eyes are called for, not a simplistic and egocentric correlation between current events and God’s final judgment.

By “end-times,” I mean the prelude to judgment by God that will result in the destruction and transformation of the world, as we know it. There are two broad evangelical positions relative to the end-times: dispensationalist and reformed. According to dispensationalists, God will “rapture” the saved church off the earth and then bring a powerful and violent judgment to bear upon all those who remain. Eventually, the earth will be destroyed and Christ will come back to judge and reign as king. Ethnic Israel will play out a special role in the advancing of God’s judgment (c.f. Wayne Grudem *Systematic Theology* pp. 859-861). Today, dispensationalist-evangelical Christians anxiously watch current events as anticipatory signals to the end times.

In 1998, I attended a presentation by a prophecy speaker named David Hocking who spoke at a Calvary Chapel in Corvallis, Oregon. For me, the presentation was (and is) quite shocking. Hocking used contemporary (1998) clashes in Israel to explain how signs of God’s

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judgment were unfolding in the Holy Land. Within less than a year, said Hocking, there would be a massive jihad against Israel, a holy war the likes of which had not yet been seen (which never materialized). Further, Hocking suggested that there was an unholy alliance between the Roman Catholic Church and Yasser Arafat. The Vatican had given Arafat permission to yell from the roof of the church of the nativity that Jesus Christ was not really a Jew. Hocking proudly boasted that when an environmentalist asked his feelings on the environment, he (Hocking) answered that his Bible told him that God was going to blow up the world, so he wasn't much concerned about the environment. My impression of Hocking's presentation was: bizarre, simplistic, and arrogant. Yet, there must have been something powerful, as I recognized intelligent people from college classes who sat mesmerized as Hocking eagerly railed against Muslims and Catholics while celebrating the coming destruction. I still cannot see how this could advance the cause of love for God and one another.

We must be honest about the fact that people have been expecting an end-times judgment by God for 2000 years. For instance, during the Black Plague that occurred in the middle 14th century, many suffering Europeans believed that given the deaths of "25 to 50 percent of the population" and resulting "economic, social, political and cultural upheaval" (Jackson Spielvogel *Western Civilization* pp. 367-368), God must be in the process of executing His final judgment. According to Jackson Spielvogel's *Western Civilization*, "World War I shattered the liberal, rational society of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe. The incredible destruction and the death of almost 10 million people undermined the whole idea of progress" (928). Some saw this carnage as the beginning of God's end for the rest of humankind and the world. Whenever there is unfathomably cataclysmic, life-altering destruction, some assume that

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the final judgment of God may be near. However, we must realize in all humility that God's timing is not our timing.

The danger of obsession with the end is that it can distract us from focusing on what's important in the here and now. If we're obsessed with what might possibly occur, we might become implicitly or explicitly world-denying, focusing our attention and energy upon what we anticipate will happen when God brings judgment instead of what we can do to love God and our neighbor most effectively right now. No matter how enthused David Hocking may have been (and probably still is), correlating current events and the "end times" has failed for 2000 years. God's judgment of the world is not up to us; but we can make the world a better place through loving God and each other.

Given Israel's role in carrying out God's plans for the end, there is a danger that dispensationalists will support aggressively pro-Israeli policies regardless of merit. While there is no doubt that the situation in and around Israel is a difficult and complex one, I don't think the USA should sanction Israeli activity in a knee-jerk fashion. In light of Israeli aggression against the USS Liberty in 1967 and near aggression against US Marines in Lebanon 1982-1984, we must remember that Israel looks out for itself first, sometimes even at direct US expense. Thus, the US must be free to act according to the good of peace in the region; this may well not be in harmony with Israel's political aims and ambitions.

According Wayne Grudem's explication of reformed theology in his *Systematic Theology*, apocalyptic language (like that found in *Revelation* or *Daniel*) is not clear enough to establish a one to one correspondence between current events and God's bringing about of the final end. Instead, Grudem recommends humility in light of the ambiguity of these unclear textual references, suggesting "it is wise to have some tentativeness in our conclusions on these

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matters” (860-861). He asserts that in the reformed view, there is not an unfolding role for Israel in the end times; rather, Grudem suggests that the old role appropriated to Israel has been shifted to the church (861-864). Moving from this to my own view, I believe Christ will come to judge and radically transform the world, but we have no idea when that will be or exactly what form it will take so we'd best be about the business of loving God and one another until He comes.

In taking a reformed position that is uncertain about the exact time or nature of Jesus' second coming, we can set aside the question of “when is the end” and use current events to turn our hearts back to God and one another. For example, the current president of the United States seems to some to be a systematic liar (“Bush’s Other Lies” by David Corn, *The Nation*, Oct 13, 2003). George W. Bush claims to be an evangelical Christian yet leads us rushing headlong into a war to seize weapons of mass destruction, only these weapons were never found. People have died (and continue to die) fighting in Iraq, yet it seems clear that the biggest beneficiaries have been corporations who stood to make money on the war. Further, the US appears to be fighting an urban guerrilla war with too few troops who are too poorly trained to accomplish their mission. Given the number of attacks, why not add 150,000 troops to the occupation force in Iraq while replacing the National Guard forces with well-trained US Army and Marine Corps infantrymen?

Across the America, there is a widespread and harmful “idolization” of the individual self through various forms of “excess” – drugs, alcohol, sexual and physical abuse to name a few. Instead of making taking a “world-denying” position by overly focusing on the end of the world, which can distract us from the present or make us politically dysfunctional (supporting Israel and US Policy regardless of justice or merit), Christian faith can draw believers to look at our current cultural, political, historical situation and reflect upon how a just God would see it. Would God

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value the ways in which Americans seem to be racing to make money at the expense of others, taking drugs to escape from reality, killing and damaging one another with violence and neglect, making idols of selfishness and the acquisition of material possessions? Perhaps we as Americans especially can set aside end times worries so as to focus upon current events that lead us to a greater awareness of the importance of loving God and each other.