

# “Presbyterians and the End-time” *by W. Eugene March*

Presbyterians have clear teaching and strong conviction about the end of the world. These come under the theological category of eschatology, the study of "last things," and include the return of Jesus Christ, God's final judgment, and the full reign of God. But fundamental is a rejection of idle speculation about the "end times." No one but God can know the time and way (Mt 24.36). Therefore certainty that God's purposes will one day be brought to completion is sufficient for Presbyterians.

**Historical Reminders.** Twenty years ago the Presbyterian Church (US) noted the growing anxiety fed by "doomsday" marketers. People like Hal Lindsey, *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, were creating uncertainty. The Rapture or 'Second Coming of Jesus' was being interpreted by dispensationalism\* as two events rather than one. First would be a "secret" coming to take the church out of the world. Then, at a later point, and dispensationalists argue frequently over the exact details, Christ would come a second time to establish God's reign on earth for a thousand years. Though there is scant Biblical testimony to support such a view (see I Thessalonians 4:17), this interpretation was advanced as clear and fundamental for faithful discipleship.

**God's Sovereignty and Freedom.** Presbyterians, along with other Christians in the Reformed family of churches, approach this subject with one central affirmation: *God alone is sovereign and free*. Although there is evil in the world, evil will not finally prevail over God. Despite the realities of sin, pain, oppression and greed, the good purpose of God will finally be realized. This affirmation sounds too many in today's world like wishful thinking, but for Presbyterians this conviction is simply the place to begin. God's sovereignty and freedom are the bedrock for Presbyterian reflection on the end times.

Since God really is Creator, Redeemer and Lord of all, we need not fear. Clearly there are times of uncertainty, but this need not lead to despair or cynicism. There is no need to speculate about when or how God's purpose will finally be accomplished. It is enough to be certain that it will.

**Confident Hope.** There have been various approaches dealing with the idea of Christ's eschatological return, the Second Coming, the *Parousia*. During the 19th century some rather optimistic movements arose. So-called postmillennialists taught that the church would largely succeed in evangelizing the world and in establishing God's reign on earth in preparation for Christ's return and the initiation of the eternal dominion of God.

More frequent in recent years has been a more pessimistic response. Its advocates believe the world to be under Satan's power. Evil is rampant. Religious authorities (except those taking this position, of course) are to be distrusted. The church -- particularly the mainline Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church—is corrupt beyond reclamation. Only the return of Christ can right things. Until that time Christians must just pray and wait.

Evoking fear seems to be the prime pursuit of many end-of-the-world-soon preachers. Most seem to be premillennialists, understanding Christ's return as inaugurating a thousand-year period before the final Judgment. (However, there are also many premillennialists who do not share in the negative view of the church described above.)

Presbyterians emphasize a confident hope over against extreme optimism or pessimism. Since there is only one God who has created the world and intends good for all creatures, there is no need for despair or fear. Since there is one God who is both gracious and purposeful, there is hope even in the face of human sin. God's purpose does not depend on human achievement, though human participation is clearly sought by God.

Confident hope is founded on belief in the goodness, mercy and reign of God. In Jesus Christ, God has acted to defeat the power of sin, although humans continue to sin. By raising Christ from the dead God has declared the divine intention to redeem creation. Nothing, not even death, will finally thwart God's will. In the assurance that Jesus will one day return to celebrate the fulfillment of God's purpose, believers can sustain confident hope. Christ's followers hope in God, not themselves. Rather than being anxious and pessimistic, God's people trust hopefully and live joyfully because in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has revealed the divine purpose of well-being for all.

**Watchfully Work.** Christ's followers are called to vigorous engagement in God's world. The task is to establish communities that demonstrate God's purpose. Instead of worrying about or speculating about the end times, energy can be invested in addressing the many problems caused by sin. Injustice in the form of racism, sexism, economic oppression is to be resisted as contrary to God's way. The brokenness of individual lives and the rips in the social fabric need attention. All that is outside God's purpose will be overcome. Until then Presbyterians, while watchfully waiting, will resist such evils.

The doctrine of Christ's Second Advent is not intended to terrify, but to motivate faithfulness in times of tedium as well as in times of crisis. Believing in Jesus' return provides encouragement when life seems purposeless or when evil seems to be too powerful to overcome.

Keeping our expectations of God's full reign fixed on Jesus provides protection from overly valuing our own achievements and from undue disappointment when human beings fall short of perfection.

**What, Then, Do Presbyterians Believe?** To those obsessed with trying to work out a timetable for Christ's return, Presbyterians say, "Only God knows, but God has given us important work to do in the meantime." To those who make too much of obscure or infrequent references in the Bible, Presbyterians say, "Let the clear and plain meaning of the Bible direct our way." To criticism of church leaders and sometimes ineffectual church programs, Presbyterians say, "Yes, even church leaders' sin. And, yes, the church isn't perfect. But the church is here by God's design to proclaim the good news of God's love by word and deed until God's loving reign is made real throughout God's world."

**We're Already There!** The current calendar is built by counting from the birth of Jesus Christ. However, a mistake in calculation was made centuries ago. In all likelihood Jesus of Nazareth was actually born four to six years earlier than once believed. Therefore the year 2000 has probably already come and gone, in God's time. And God's charge remains: confidently hope and watchfully work until the Lord returns.

\* Dispensationalism or dispensational premillennialism divides world history into seven eras or dispensations, based on how God deals with humanity, before the establishment of God's kingdom.