

11 The last things

The Welsh like the gospel because it gives them something to sing about; the Irish like the gospel because it gives them something to fight about; and the Scots like the gospel because it is free.' So goes the adage.

One part of the gospel which seems to be fought over more than any other is the doctrine of 'the last things', called by the theologians 'eschatology' (which means just about the same thing, but is Greek).

What will happen when God winds up the universe? Theories and schemes abound, and each one has its advocates. Sometimes it seems that the less scriptural evidence there is for an idea, the more firmly it is clung to, and the more animosity is reserved for those who seek to differ.

How can we dare to open such a can of worms? I will not be able to consider the great number of theories which have been proposed. However, my aim in this book is not to deal with many schemes, but rather to show how any scheme may be examined in the light of the principles presented in Chapter 2 and the Biblical themes in Chapters 3 to 6. These tools will serve to show which schemes are more likely to be right, and which are most suspect.

In this chapter I will seek to home in on only one such scheme, but it is one which has achieved considerable popularity and which has influenced many people who perhaps would not recognise this scheme in its entirety.

The millennium

One matter which is at the heart of many theories of the last things is that of the millennium, so you will need to understand what this about.

A millennium is 1000 years. The millennium in question is only mentioned specifically in Revelation 20:1-3:

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

This 1000 years is described as the time during which those who have been executed (the Greek word means 'killed with an axe') because of their witness to Christ will come to life and reign.

Let us consider this in the light of the principles proposed in Chapter 2. Revelation is far from being a clear book to interpret, and this passage is perhaps the most difficult part of the book. There are three main interpretations which have been advanced which differ according to when Christ is going to take the church to

himself. These three are known as 'premillennial', 'postmillennial' and 'amillennial'.

Premillennial

This interpretation supposes that Christ will come for the church before ('pre-') the 1000 years. Messiah will then reign over the earth for this period, during which time the devil will be prevented from hindering.

Postmillennial

This sees the 1000 years being a time of blessing for the church at the end of this current age. Christ will return for the church after ('post-') the millennium.

Amillennial

The millennium is seen not ('a-') as a literal 1000 years, but as symbolic of all the time between Christ's life on earth and the second coming. The devil's activity is seen as restricted because of Christ's triumphant death and resurrection.

There are difficulties in all three of these positions. The passage speaks of martyrs, not of the church as a whole. Their reign could be in heaven rather than on earth. In terms of the principles of Chapter 2, we find it difficult to start with what is clear, because it is hard to find any clear passage from which to start.

The story is told of a man who saw that the minister, on leaving the church, had dropped his sermon notes. When he picked them up, he saw that one part read, 'Argument weak here: shout louder!'

At this point you should hear the alarm bells ringing. An obscure passage is the only one to mention the millennium, yet this concept is made central to many theories about the last things. Some believers will then contend bitterly for the theories they espouse. We are on very dangerous ground.

Of these three positions, the premillennial view foretells a time after Christ has come for the church when much will happen on the earth. This theory in particular requires a number of questions to be answered. Will it still be possible then for people to believe in Christ and be saved through grace? How will God deal with people in that age? These are questions which have been addressed by some in terms of 'dispensations'.

The dispensations

The most common form of premillennialism is a system called 'dispensationalism'. (I apologise for the awful terminology. Stick with it!) Perhaps you are thinking to yourself, 'What on earth have I to do with dispensations, whatever they are?' Perhaps they have more relevance to you than you realise.

The system of dispensationalism has spread far and wide, and reached to those who may never have heard of the term. It has been particularly influential in shaping

how many Christians regard the second coming of Christ, the millennium, the Jews and the land of Israel. The concepts were circulated largely through the *Scofield Reference Bible* (copyright 1917, Oxford University Press). A Bible with notes throughout, to tell you, when you read any passage, how to interpret that passage, is a powerful tool. Unfortunately, it can also hinder the process of letting the Bible speak for itself, and can bias a fair assessment of true interpretation. So we need our principles and themes to weigh up its findings.

Scofield asserts that there are seven ‘dispensations’ in the Bible. By these, he apparently means seven periods of history marked by different relationships between God and mankind. His dispensations, with the periods assigned to them, are as follows:

1. Innocency. Adam and Eve in the garden before the fall.
2. Conscience. From the fall to the flood.
3. Human government. After the flood up to the tower of Babel.
4. Promise. From God’s call of Abraham to the exodus from Egypt.
5. Law. From the giving of the law up to the crucifixion.
6. Grace. From the crucifixion up to Christ coming again for the church.
7. Kingdom. God’s dealings with Israel after the church is taken.

When you read Scofield, the periods of these seven dispensations are clear. If you do not have the benefit of Scofield’s notes, though, it is not obvious that this is the way the Bible must be interpreted. The foundation for these ideas does not seem to be either broad or deep. You need to ask yourself, would they pass the desert island test of Chapter 2?

Note that it is only during dispensation number 6 that Scofield sees God dealing with men by means of the gospel of his grace. This is the church period. The period when Christ was teaching here on earth was still part of the dispensation of law, and during that time the gospel of the kingdom was preached for Israel, says Scofield. At the end of the church period the church will be taken to be with Christ but the rest of humanity will remain on earth. This is the ‘secret rapture’, where ‘rapture’ is used in the sense of ‘taking away’. After the church has gone, God will once again deal with his ancient people Israel.

We must now consider the ideas which are basic to dispensationalism, and see how they compare with the clearest words we can find in the scriptures.

The interlude of grace

Strict adherents to the dispensational system consider that virtually all of Christ’s teaching when he was here on earth was for the sake of the kingdom of Israel, and not for the church. Some even go as far as to say that ‘there is no gospel in the Gospels’. There is the gospel of the kingdom, they will say, but this is not the same as the gospel of the grace of God. Whilst perhaps not all would be so extreme, the term ‘kingdom of God’ in the gospels is supposed to refer to God’s kingship over the Jews, not the church.

The kingdom is seen as the Messianic rule of Christ the Son of David, and so is reserved for the relationship between Christ and the Jews. It is not considered to be applicable to the church. This ‘kingdom of God’ was in effect throughout the dispensation of law (until the crucifixion) and then is suspended during the dispensation of grace. When Christ comes and takes the church to himself, this ‘kingdom’ is then applicable once more.

In fact, some see the church period, the dispensation of grace, as an interlude. All God’s prophecies in the Old Testament are put on hold while the church is born, while it proclaims the gospel of grace, and then is taken to be with Christ. Some have said that during this interval ‘the prophetic clock stops ticking.’

Is there really such a difference between the gospel which Christ preached on earth and that preached after his death? In the gospels Jesus proclaimed good news based on his sacrificial death for us (Mark 10:45). He told Nicodemus that unless he was born again he could not see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). Everyone who believes in Christ has eternal life, we are told (John 3:16). What is this but the gospel of the grace of God?

During the church period Philip in Samaria preached ‘the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ’ and men and women were baptized (Acts 8:12). Paul and Barnabas told the disciples that ‘we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God’ (Acts 14:22). Paul lived in Rome and ‘preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ’ (Acts 28:31). In all of these cases the preaching was to Gentiles. Paul declares that ‘the kingdom of God’ is ‘righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Romans 14:17). Were these people, when they spoke of the kingdom, not speaking about the gospel of the grace of God?

It appears that there is only one gospel. There is only one way to be saved. This is clearly made known in Hebrews: ‘How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him’ (Hebrews 2:3). The writer to the Hebrews is saying that Jesus (the Lord) declared this salvation. Those who heard him (the apostles) also bore witness to this same message. This is the message which we are exhorted not to neglect in this, the church period. What Jesus preached and what the apostles preached was the same. It was the same gospel all along. This tallies with the theme we saw in Chapter 3. There is now only one way of salvation, only one gospel, the gospel of the grace of God through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

The conclusion one comes to is that the gospel of the kingdom of God is identical with the gospel of the grace of God, the gospel which was preached by the early church.

The second coming

The premillennial view requires two returns for Christ. One is the time when he will come to take his people to himself. The second is when he comes after the

millennium to execute judgement on all people.

There are three Greek words used to refer to Christ's coming. These are *parousia* ('coming'), *epiphaneia* ('appearing') and *apokalypsis* ('revelation'). Attempts have been made to allocate these words to different comings, but with little success. Believers are encouraged to wait for Christ's *parousia* (James 5:7), for his *epiphaneia* (Titus 2:13) and for his *apokalypsis* (1 Corinthians 1:7).

The New Testament speaks of God giving his people relief at the same time as he comes in judgement on the ungodly. This seems to be most clearly expressed in 2 Thessalonians 1:6–8:

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

These verses make plain that at one and the same time (a) God will grant rest to his people; (b) the Lord Jesus will be revealed in his glorious second coming; (c) unbelievers and persecutors of the church will suffer his final judgement, 'eternal destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord' (v. 9).

Christ spoke about the coming of the Son of man, when two people will be together, and one will be taken and one left (Matthew 24:40, 41). The context of Matthew chapter 24 is (vv. 30–1):

They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

This can hardly be described as secret. The whole world will know. Revelation 1:7 also describes Christ 'coming with the clouds', and adds, 'every eye will see him'. Can you find clear evidence in the Bible for a secret coming of Christ for his church and a subsequent, much later, glorious coming to bring an end to this present age? I must confess that I cannot.

It seems clear that when Christ comes again for his people, it will be in glory, and will signal the end of history.

After the church

What happens after the church is taken to be with Christ? The dispensationalist sees this as a different dispensation, when the world goes through the great tribulation and then during the millennium the Messianic kingdom of Christ is established with the nation of Israel.

According to dispensationalists, it is during this period that God once again takes up his ancient people Israel, the Jews, and deals with them according to the Law. The Messianic kingdom is established. Some even consider that at that time the temple will be rebuilt and animal sacrifices offered once again. The re-establishment of the nation of Israel in recent times is seen as a foreshadowing of God dealing in these ways.

In Chapters 3 to 6 we traced some of the major themes of the New Testament, and likened these to the framework which gives strength to a skyscraper. These themes are so fundamental and so clearly displayed in the scriptures that any other themes which are being suggested must be judged by them.

We saw that Christ's sacrifice provided a way of salvation which is once for all God's unique way of restoring people to fellowship with himself. We saw that God's people, his new Israel, comprises all who trust in Christ for salvation, whether they are physically descended from Israel or not. We saw that the promised land is interpreted in the New Testament in spiritual terms as the place where God is to be found. We saw that Christ abolished the Law by fulfilling it.

Premillennial theories expect that there will be a period after the church is gone when God deals with people in a way different from his dealings in the present church age. Usually it is expected that God once again will take up the Jews simply because of their physical descent and irrespective of their faith in Christ. In some way they are to be saved, even if it is not trusting in the salvation which is the keystone of the church period. God is expected to return to dealing with people on the basis of the Law even though in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 31:31ff) he promised that he was inaugurating a better covenant. As for restarting the temple sacrifices, these fly in the face of Christ's sacrifice, once for all, ending all other sacrifices.

Not only are these ideas founded on unclear passages (and very few of them), but they contradict the main themes which we saw to be securely established.

What does it matter?

It is a shame that the subject of the last things has become a happy hunting ground for those with ideas which have little or no secure foundation in the scriptures. There are passages in the New Testament about this subject which are not only clear but also of great relevance to us in our daily lives.

As someone said, 'It isn't the passages I don't understand that worry me; it's those I do understand!'

We know for sure that Christ is going to return to take those of us who believe in him to be with him (John 14:3). We can take comfort in the fact that believers who have died will also join with us, to be with the Lord for ever (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

The fact that the end of the universe as we know it is imminent brings a moral responsibility on us to live holy and godly lives (2 Peter 3:10-13). We must be ready for Christ to come at an unexpected time, fulfilling the responsibilities he has given us towards the rest of his servants (Matthew 24:42-51).

In preparing for the coming of Christ we will hardly have time to bother ourselves with outlandish ideas which have little foundation in the Bible as a whole. And a good thing too, if these ideas run counter to the major themes of Christ and his salvation.