

Teaching About the Last Things

**A Position Paper of the
Church of the Lutheran Brethren**

Approved June, 1997

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Preface

In the history of the church, teaching about the end times has been marked by extremes. At one extreme the scriptural teaching about the “last things” is set aside and largely ignored. At the other extreme, it has a central role and is one of the major topics of preaching. This study seeks to establish a proper biblical balance in teaching about the last things, a balance that is achieved by submitting to the purposes Scripture gives for revelation of the last things.

The format of “Affirmations and Denials” used in the later part of the study exemplifies an approach that both declares a certain future and admits that mysteries remain. The Affirmations state positively what we believe Scripture teaches. The Denials state negatively what we believe Scripture does not teach concerning the point being made in the Affirmation. In this manner the boundaries are set for the Affirmations indicating the biblical limits. We are to speak when Scripture speaks and to be silent when Scripture is silent or unclear to us. As the Apostle Paul states, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Approved position papers function as official statements of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren (CLB) and provide a guide for the pastors, teachers, and congregations of the CLB. Other position papers include those on *Abortion, Human Sexuality, Divorce and Remarriage*, and *The Role of Women in the Church*.

Basic Terminology

“Eschatology” comes from the New Testament Greek word for “last” (*eschatos*) and means “the study of the last things.” This theological term is normally used with reference to the study of biblical teachings regarding the second coming of Jesus Christ and the end of the age. Jesus clearly taught that the world system would come to a sudden cataclysmic end at His return to earth:

Matthew 24:30: At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.

For the regenerate the return of Christ will be a joyous event, characterized by the resurrection of believers and by rejoicing in the presence of Christ.

John 14:3: And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17: For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

For the unbeliever the return of Christ will be a time of mourning, fear and judgment.

At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. Matthew 24:30a. (See also Matthew 25:31-46; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10; Jude 14-16.)

Orthodox biblical Christians after the New Testament times have continued to affirm that the Messiah Jesus will return to earth a second time at the end of the age. We confess this truth in the Apostles' Creed ("He will come again to judge the living and the dead"), the Nicene Creed ("he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end"), and the Athanasian Creed ("he shall come to judge the living and the dead").

"Kingdom" as used by Jesus and the Gospel writers includes two main ideas: (1) God's rule over professing believers in the present spiritual aspect of the Kingdom (e.g., Matthew 21:31; 23:13; Mark 12:34; Luke 10:9; 17:21; 18:17); and (2) God's visible rule in the future eschatological aspect of the Kingdom after the second coming of Christ (e.g., Matthew 8:11; 26:29; Luke 13:28-29; 22:30). Some passages refer both to present and future aspects of God's Kingdom (e.g., Matthew 6:10).

Biblical Purposes for Eschatological Teaching

The four major purposes of the biblical teaching on the last things are to inform believers concerning the future, to comfort them in times of great change, to warn all people to be ready to meet the Lord at any time, and to put them on guard lest the crisis events give an opportunity for deception.

In His earthly ministry, Jesus informed and comforted His disciples by telling them about future events that might terrify them so that when they happened the disciples might believe in Him and be able to accept the difficulties they must face. He spoke this way of His crucifixion.

John 13:19 (NAS): From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am He.

In the same way He spoke of His second coming.

Matthew 24:3-6: As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ, and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. (Italics added)

Luke 21:28 "When these things begin to take place, stand up and life up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Jesus also warned those who heard Him that the end was coming and that they should be ready because it would come without warning. The parable of the ten virgins draws us dramatically into the reality that we should be ready for the Lord's return. The parable ends with the words:

Matthew 25:11-13 (NAS): And later the other virgins also came, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open up for us.’ But he answered and said, ‘Truly I say to you, I do not know you.’ Be alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.

When the apostles spoke of the second coming they struck the same chords.

1 Thessalonians 4:18: Therefore encourage each other with these words.

2 Peter 3:11: Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives.

1 John 2:28: And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.

A Survey of the Various Views

Various opinions about the nature of the future kingdom have sparked lively debate among true Christians throughout church history. Four major views generally exist among conservative Christians who accept the biblical teaching of the literal return of Jesus Christ at the end of history. All four views claim to interpret the Scriptures according to the grammatical – historical method. They seek to discover the meaning intended by the divine author. They differ on the interpretation of some of the crucial texts. Parables, for example, are a different form of literature than historical narrative. In regard to a prophetic text: Is Revelation 20 a straight narrative, non-figurative, prophetic statement or is it an apocalyptic form of literature and therefore to be interpreted accordingly?

- 1) **The Historic Premillennial View:** This position tends to take Scripture in Revelation 20:2-7 as a narrative, non-figurative, prophetic statement and holds that the thousand-year reign of Christ mentioned in Revelation 20:2-7 refers to an actual future period of 1,000 years during which the Messiah rules His kingdom on earth. Some premillennialists understand the “1,000 years” as a period of exactly one thousand years while others as an extended period of time. Premillennialists believe this aspect of the future kingdom will occur before the eternal state described in Revelation 21. The return of Christ will be one event in contrast with the dispensational premillennialists who see it as two events one of which is called the rapture. This view understands the church as the spiritual Israel and therefore does not make the same kind of distinction between the church and Israel as does dispensational premillennialism. This basic form of premillennialism appears in the writings of several ante-Nicene Church Fathers and in modern times became popular once again during the nineteenth century.
- 2) **The Dispensational Premillennial View:** This position also takes the Scripture in Revelation 20:2-7 as a narrative, non-figurative, prophetic statement and holds that the thousand-year reign of Christ mentioned in Revelation 20:2-7 refers to an actual future period of 1,000 years during which the Messiah rules His kingdom on earth. Premillennialists believe this aspect of the future kingdom will occur before the eternal state described in Revelation 21. Dispensational premillennialists hold that the millennium will include a spiritually renewed Jewish nation ruled by the Messiah and that many aspects of the Hebrew prophets’ description of life in the visible kingdom of God will occur during this time (e.g., see Isaiah 11; 12:1). This view generally holds that the coming of Christ will involve two events, one of which is called the rapture (This will be further defined below.). This view has been considered to be consistent with the historic position of the CLBA, although the synod does not mandate adherence to this particular position.

Within the dispensational premillennial view there are four positions on the chronology of the tribulation period to occur before Christ’s return (e.g., see Revelation 7:14):

- a) The *pre-tribulational* view holds that the second coming of Christ will occur in two phases – the first a rapture of the church along with the resurrection of the saved to meet Christ in the air and be with Him in heaven before the tribulation period after which Christ returns to earth to establish His millennial reign.
- b) The *mid-tribulational* view is similar to the pre-tribulational, except that it holds the resurrection and rapture will occur midway through the tribulation.

- c) The *post-tribulational* view believes the rapture and second coming to be essentially a single simultaneous event occurring after the tribulation, at which time the Messiah Jesus establishes His millennial reign. This view has much in common with the historic premillennial view and is sometimes equated with it.
 - d) The *partial rapture* view believes that not all believers are raptured at one time.
- 3) **The Amillennial View:** This position holds that the second coming of Christ is a single event at the consummation of history. The millennium is not considered to be a literal earthly reign of Christ but is rather a figurative expression for the present reign consummated at His second coming. The eternal state immediately follows the personal, bodily return of Jesus Christ, the resurrection and final judgment of all. This is the position held by most Lutheran churches.
- 4) **The Postmillennial View:** This view generally holds that through the preaching of the Gospel the kingdom of God will gradually be spread so that the blessings of Christianity will generally prevail throughout the world. This glorious reign of Christ will result in an age of peace and prosperity, which is called the millennium, before His personal, bodily return. Following Christ's return, all will be resurrected and the final judgment will take place.

Appropriateness to the Biblical Purposes

The premillennial view, the dispensational premillennial view, the amillennial view and the postmillennial view all serve the biblical purpose of calling all to be ready for the return of Christ and for the judgment. The two premillennial views place greater emphasis on the signs of the times and so serves to provide comfort to people in the midst of troubling events. The dispensational view may identify these signs with certain current events to warn people to be ready, but when it does so, it runs the risk of becoming too specific and practicing a form of teaching that is in conflict with the words of Christ about the church age when He says,

Acts 1:7: He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

The amillennialists may have a tendency to be indifferent to the signs of the times and the second coming of Christ. This is contrary to the teaching of Scripture and therefore this neglect is to be avoided according to Matthew 24 and 25 where Jesus answers the question: "What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?"

The Church of the Lutheran Brethren

While there are faithful, Bible-believing Christians who hold each of the views summarized here, the CLB has historically affirmed the premillennial views. Yet we recognize that all of the interpretations have both strengths and weaknesses. The literal second advent of Christ is a fundamental of the Christian faith clearly taught by our Lord and accepted by all orthodox Christians affirming the authority of Scripture, but any specific interpretation of the chronology surrounding the events of Christ's return is not a fundamental doctrine. Bearing these facts in mind, the CLB submits the following summary of affirmations and denials:

1. We affirm that the preaching and teaching of the church on the second coming of Christ should be based upon the exegesis of Scripture according to sound, Christ-centered, biblical hermeneutical principles. We deny that the norm for the preaching and teaching of the church on the second coming of Christ should be characterized by personal speculations or reasonings.
2. We affirm that the preaching and teaching of the church should set forth the signs, taught in Scripture, that precede Christ's second coming. We deny that these signs can be interpreted to indicate the day and hour, an exact sequence of events of Christ's second coming or that they should be ignored in the preaching and teaching of the church.
3. We affirm that God calls people to be prepared for the second coming of Christ and to live in active readiness. We deny that God has given detailed knowledge of the end times in order that we may be occupied with knowing the exact nature and sequence of the final events rather than with living in readiness for His coming.

4. We affirm that proclaiming the second coming of Jesus Christ and the end of the age gives useful urgency to the evangelistic call. We deny that preaching on the last things should become the dominant emphasis in evangelism in such a manner that it drowns out the voice of the Spirit convicting of sin and illuminating God's saving grace in Christ Jesus.
5. We affirm that Scripture teaches that Christ will reign 1,000 years and that the Church of the Lutheran Brethren's primary tradition is premillennial, while allowing for other interpretations. Our premillennial tradition will be taught in our schools and churches. We deny that Scripture sets forth every detail of the nature of Christ's reign with minute precision.
6. We affirm that the teaching of the church on the last things should be anchored in exegetical studies. We deny that it is necessary to go beyond what is written to resolve the tensions or to dispel the mysteries where the Scripture is silent.

This paper was prepared by The Study Committee on Eschatology composed of Pastors Curt Atneosen, Eugene Boe and Michael Heuer. The committee was authorized by the Annual Convention of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren.

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