

## Christians Need to Be Cautious in End-Times Matters

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By Max Aplin



At the present time, in many Christian circles end-times issues are the focus of a huge amount of attention. It is surely not exaggerating to say that for large numbers of Christians today more effort is expended analyzing this topic than any other area of Christian belief or practice.

There is, of course, absolutely nothing wrong with taking an interest in end-times things. The fact that the Bible contains the books of Daniel and Revelation, and portions of the gospels such as Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21, shows that studying end-times issues is a healthy thing in itself. Moreover, Jesus Himself, in the parable of the fig tree in Matt 24:32-33, Mark 13:28-29 and Luke 21:29-31

, encourages us to consider these things. Steering clear of end-times matters because they are supposedly too difficult or not important enough is certainly not a biblical attitude to take.

Nevertheless, I am sure that many Christians spend too much time thinking about this topic. Important though end-times issues are, they should surely not normally be allowed to hold center stage in the way that they so often do. There are so many other important things requiring the urgent attention of believers today. For example, the church in the West is under severe attack as regards family and sexual values, and there is a real need for those who will get involved in defending biblical truth in this area. Or, take the plight of persecuted Christians. At present, persecution of believers is probably greater than it has ever been, and there is a need for those who will pray in an informed way for brothers and sisters suffering for the faith and who will help them in other ways as well. Many more things are crying out for attention too. Time is a very precious commodity and we need to be careful about how we prioritize our use of it. Those who channel so much effort into speculation and discussion about end-times issues should ask themselves if they have got the balance right. I think for many, things have

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become unbalanced and out of control.

Certainly, there are bound to be some Christians who are called by God to spend large amounts of time considering this topic, just as there are specialists in all other areas of the faith. However, it makes sense to believe that those who are genuinely called in this way will be fairly few in number. It seems to me that many believers immerse themselves in speculation of end-times things without really listening for God's voice on how they prioritize their commitments.

In saying all this, I do want to stress that I am in no way trying to discourage Christians from taking an interest in end-times issues. I am just concerned that this should almost always be one thing among many that are the focus of their attention.

As well as spending too much time considering end-times matters, another problem which often arises is that Christians who have very specific end-times theologies can become hostile to others who do not share their views.

I believe this is almost always a big mistake. It is very important for us to know when something is worth dividing over and when it is not. I am sure that there are many times when we can believe that someone else is mistaken on something that is of real importance yet rightly believe also that it is still not worth falling out over.

In fact, I can think of a positive example of this in my own church that concerns end-times matters. Among our number we have one brother who has written books defending pre-tribulational premillennialism, and he believes strongly that this end-times theory is the correct one. I can think too of another brother who is staunchly amillennialist. Both these men love and respect each other, even though they are both convinced that the other is wrong on this issue. They have decided that their differences in end-times things are not important enough to damage their unity in Christ, and I believe they have judged rightly and that God rejoices in their decision.

That is not to say that there are no end-times issues worth dividing over. Two beliefs that should be regarded as essential are that Jesus will one day return to earth in the way He ascended to heaven (Acts 1:9-11), and that He will judge all the living and the dead (2 Cor 5:10 ; Rev 20:11-15

). If a professing Christian denies either of these things, then they have denied a basic Christian truth that has been held as such by the worldwide church down through the centuries, and I believe it would be right to refuse to offer Christian unity to someone who holds such a view.

Another problem in end-times issues that often arises is believers' over-confidence in their theories. I think sometimes this is down to arrogance, at other times to naivety, and sometimes to a mixture of both.

For example, I can remember that in the late 1980s there were many Christians who were

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confident that Communism was going to turn out to be a big player in the unfolding of end-times events. Unsurprisingly, with the demise of the Soviet Union, a large majority of these people no longer hold this view.

We need to be clear that if, as seems highly likely, Communism will prove never to be a major player in end-times events, those who said that it would be gave a false prophecy. To wrongly state that something to do with Christianity will take place is to act as a false prophet. There is no other way of putting it.

What is worse, so many of those who predict things and then change their minds or are shown to be wrong, instead of being horrified that they have allowed themselves to mislead people, or at least to potentially mislead them, seem instead to say to themselves something like: 'Well, what do you know. I was wrong. What a surprise. OK, that was wrong, but this - the next theory - will be right' and proceed to give another equally confident prediction!

If a Christian is shown to have got something wrong in any way, they should always take stock and make sure that they do everything possible to avoid making a similar mistake in the future. It seems to me that all too often Christians who make false end-times predictions are not learning from their mistakes and show no real humility or sense of shame in the face of what they have done.

Nor should we underestimate the potential damage of false prophecies on people. Firstly, there is the impact on Christians to bear in mind. If believers are led to believe something false about the future, the result can be that they spend their time and energy in wrong ways with very bad consequences. They can also become discouraged and disillusioned when they come to realise that what they believed was false. Secondly, the damage to the reputation of Christianity, and by extension Jesus' reputation, in the eyes of non-believers, when things are predicted that do not come to pass, is obvious. People will inevitably be put off the faith.

As I have noted, there are times when false prophecies concern what events will occur in the future. At other times, however, they involve when events will take place.

It is quite rare to hear people actually predicting the date on which Jesus will return, but, as we know all too well, it does happen, and sometimes prophecies of this kind make headline news. The damage to the reputation of the gospel when the date passes and Jesus has not appeared is always significant.

Christians themselves are also sometimes led astray by these predictions. It is important to remember, however, that in the Bible Jesus can be found telling His disciples that no one knows the date on which He will return (Matt 24:36; Mark 13:32), and there is a strong implication in these verses that that date will never be revealed before He appears. We should therefore never believe a prophecy giving the date of Jesus' return. It is not from God.

Although prophecies of the date of Jesus' return are rare, there is another type of wrong prediction of the timing of things that is very common in some Christian circles. Very frequently Christians can be heard saying things like, 'I expect that Jesus will return within about five to

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ten years, but definitely no later than twenty years from now'; or 'I am sure that the rapture (understood as an event prior to the actual return of Jesus) will take place within the next ten to twenty years'; or such like.

Many Christians who have made predictions of this kind have lived to see the time limit pass. I think sometimes those who have falsely prophesied the future in this way imagine that no real harm has been done, but that would be a mistake.

To be sure, this type of false prediction is not as bad as giving a false date on which something will happen, but it is still harmful. As I have already mentioned, giving any sort of false prediction of the future can only be detrimental to evangelistic efforts, since the credibility of Christians, and by extension the gospel itself, is bound to be negatively affected.

Furthermore, giving a false time frame within which end-times events will occur can cause Christians to make bad decisions. For example, a church might consider expanding its work by embarking upon a new building project. However, if the believers there are then misled into thinking that Jesus will return within a certain time limit (that turns out to be false), they might decide it's not worth going ahead with this work. Then, when it becomes apparent that their insight into the timing of things was in error, they might have lost many years of fruitful ministry.

We should be in no doubt that this is a serious business. As a remedy to this problem I believe that Christians should never give any time limits at all for when Jesus will return or anything of this kind. Nor do I believe it is wise even to give time frames that are considered probable. I believe instead that we should teach openly both that end-times events may unfold imminently, and that they may not unfold for very many years to come. I think that would be faithful to the tone of Scripture in which both these outlooks seem to be present. It would also serve to keep Christians on their toes, watching for a possible imminent unfolding of things, while discouraging them from making short-sighted plans for the future. Moreover, it would avoid the danger of Christians, and by extension the Christian message and Jesus Himself, being brought into disrepute among non-believers when predictions turn out to be false.

I think in considering end-times issues, there is a real need on the part of many Christians to show much more humility. I, for one, would love to hear words like 'maybe', 'possibly' and 'perhaps' used much more often as believers consider how end-times events will unfold. It is far better to be undecided than to firmly believe something that is wrong.

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