

Futurism's Countdown: Fact or Fantasy?

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Although elements of the current futurist- dispensationalist system of prophetic interpretation are found as far back as the early church fathers (2nd-3rd centuries A.D.) and the Catholic counter-reformation (16th century), it was first formulated and promulgated in the 1830's and onward by a "back to the Bible" movement in England known as the Plymouth Brethren. Since the first decade of the present century, it has been popularized across denominational lines by the widely used *Scofield Reference Bible*, and in more recent years by a flood of best-sellers numbering millions of copies from evangelical presses.

Futurist interpretations of the prophecies do not stem from critics who have lost faith in the Scriptures and Jesus Christ. To the contrary, the persons who espouse this viewpoint are conservative, Bible-loving Christians who expect a soon return of Christ. It would seem, therefore, that Seventh-day Adventists would have much in common, but as will be observed by this series of articles, our explanations of the prophecies are quite different.

As the Christian follows the path of Bible truth, he does well to realize he will encounter as much danger on his right from those who misinterpret the Scriptures in all sincerity as he will from those on his left who reject its authority outright. The tracks of error and truth often lie close together, but ultimately they diverge. Although emphasis on some last-day signs of Christ's coming may be similar, Seventh-day Adventist preaching of Bible prophecy is basically incompatible with futurist expositions.

Some Characteristics

Futurist interpretations of prophecy can be maintained only by an extreme literalism and the lifting of passages out of context. For example, the "image of the beast" (Rev 13:15) must mean a statue, and the "mark" of the beast a kind of tattoo. Christ's prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (Matt 24:1, 2, 15-20)-fulfilled in A.D. 70-is wrested from its context to prove that Christ taught a restoration of Israel to Palestine, the building of a third temple, and Israel's observance of the Sabbath in Palestine in the end-time of history!

More serious and fundamental to the system are its errors which rupture the *unity* of the plan of salvation, the followers of God, and the Holy Scriptures. Instead of *one* plan spanning both Testaments (cf Heb 4:1, 2), seven dispensations are invented in which God deals differently with each group of mankind. Instead of *one* family of God on earth (Christians considered the Hebrews their spiritual forebears, 1 Cor 10:1), Israel is arbitrarily separated from the church and is predestined to inherit all the promises made to it in a future millennial kingdom. Likewise the Old Testament and most of the instruction in the Gospels of the New are construed to be especially for Israel in the Kingdom Age. Only the Epistles of the New Testament are for the spiritual guidance of the church in the present era! Such assumptions naturally affect futurist interpretations of the Scriptures.

Last-Day Events

As the first article of the series has described in some detail the futurist system and its understanding in regard to the role of Israel, this article will touch on only a few aspects of what futurists expect in time's final countdown.

Central to futurism's view of last-day events are the Jewish people. The forecast goes like this: (1) The Jews will be restored to Palestine in the end-time (fulfillment, establishment of the state of Israel, 1948). (2) The Jews will recover the city of Jerusalem and its sacred sites

(fulfillment, Six-day War, June 1967). (3) The Jews will rebuild the Temple on its ancient site; sacrifices will be offered again (immediate fulfillment expected).

Since the forecasts of the first two points have been fulfilled, Futurists naturally anticipate the soon occurrence of the third. The third expectation is believed to be interlocked with the last seven years of this age, and so there is a heightened awareness not of the soon victorious return of Christ, however, but of a secret rapture of the Church away from great troubles to come, of the reign of a world dictator (Antichrist), and of a terrible time of tribulation for those not raptured.

The last years. Futurism is so-called because it places the bulk of prophetic fulfillments in the future beyond the Christian era rather than in historical time. Arbitrarily the 70th prophetic week (7 years) of Daniel's prophecy (Dan 9:24-27) is detached from its context and placed at the end of the age. The "gap theory," as it is sometimes called, temporarily suspends all fulfillment of prophecy until the Christian era is over. This unwarranted wresting of the prophecy revives the erroneous teaching of the church father, Hippolytus (died c 236), and fashions the frame for the Futurist's picture of earth's last seven years.

Seventh-day Adventists believe a straight-forward study of Daniel's 70-week prophecy (490 literal years) will clearly show it to be *an unbroken unit* of time especially allotted to the nation of Israel. Since the Messiah was to come during this period, it could have been the grandest era of Israel's history (Isa 60:1-3). The first 69 prophetic weeks (483 years) extended not to the birth of the Messiah, but to His official appearance. It was at His baptism that Jesus, being anointed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:38; Matt 3:13-17), began His official ministry as the "Anointed One," or Messiah.

It follows therefore that the remaining "week" (7 years) of the prophecy must be occupied with the years of the Saviour's ministry, His atoning death, His entrance into heaven to begin His priestly ministry (Dan 9:24; Heb 8:1, 2), and the continued appeal to the nation by the apostles until the period closed in AD 34 with a second national rejection of the

Messiah in the stoning of Stephen. It was Christ's ministry and sacrificial death which confirmed the everlasting covenant (cf Dan 9:27; Rom 15:8) and brought the significance of the sacrificial system to an end (Matt 27:50, 51; Eph 2:13-17).

A secret rapture. While not all Futurist's teach this concept, it is the prevailing belief. It is argued that Christ's second coming is in two stages-a secret rapture or snatching away of the Church at the beginning of the seven year period, and a visible, glorious return with the Church to the earth at its close. Israel is related to this notion in that the removal of the Church permits God to resume relationships with the Jews who continue to gather back to Palestine. The general view is that God will then select and seal 144,000 literal Jews who will evangelize the world with the Gospel of the Kingdom (all within this period!), garnering in an innumerable host of converts to Christ.

Seventh-day Adventists believe the testimony of the Bible consistently teaches only *one* return of Christ. All Scripture points to *one* great consummation-the return of our Lord in *one* great victory day for God and His people. The very text often cited in behalf of a secret snatching away (1 Thess 4:14-17) is seen to teach just the opposite: "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven *with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God:* and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." (vv 16, 17).

The coming of Christ will be both seen and heard. Furthermore, to suggest that evangelization will take place *after* the coming of Christ is to create a "second-chance" theory, a concept quite foreign to the Bible. Such a view places millions of redeemed in heaven while it extends probation to those persons still living on the earth!

Antichrist. By putting a gap (the Christian era) *between* the fourth beast (pagan Rome) of Daniel's vision (ch 7) and its horns, current Futurist teaching looks for a *political* antichrist (the little horn with eyes and mouth)-a single, world dictator-who will take over a revived

form of the Roman empire (10 horns) at the beginning of the seven-year period. Although he makes a covenant with the Jews permitting the temple and its services to function, he later breaks it, stops the ritual, deifies himself in the Jewish temple, and commands worship. From this point on his tyrannical rule triggers a great period of tribulation (3½ years) that whips the nations up into an all-out Armageddon in Palestine, the Jewish nation being the center of the maelstrom.

Seventh-day Adventists believe this view simply revives the Catholic counter-reformation teachings of the Jesuit Francisco Ribera (c 1590). Ribera sought to deflect the prophetic finger away from the papacy as the Christian apostasy sitting in the temple of the Church seeking to control the conscience of Christendom by acting in God's place (2 Thess 2:1-8).

The prophecy of the "little horn" in Daniel 7 together with its parallel, "the leopard beast" in Revelation 13:1-10, and the "man of sin" in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8 have always been considered by Christians as dealing with the subject of the Antichrist. Daniel's prophecy pointing *back* into historic time clearly places the rise of the "little horn" *among* the nations of Western Europe, sometimes *after* the dissolution of the Roman empire (AD 476). It would be characterized by a *religious* nature, and would not only speak great words against God, but would also change His times and Law, and would persecute His people for an extended period of time. Only a *system* of apostasy could adequately fulfill these prophecies.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Christians are never warned against political governments as such in the Bible. Rather, they are warned against *spiritual* deceptions (cf 2 Thess 2:5-7; 1 Tim 4:1; Matt 24:24, etc).

A Jewish millennial kingdom. According to Futurist teaching an open advent of Christ with His Church halts Armageddon. Antichrist and his forces are slain. Israel accepts the Lord as the Messiah, and enters with Him as His covenant people into a 1,000 year Kingdom Age. Christ rules directly over the nations in their mortal state from the throne of David in

Jerusalem. Incongruous as it may seem (after Calvary and Christ's mediatorial ministry) the temple and the typical services function again. Those who reject Christ's rule are eventually judged and destroyed at the end of the Millennium; the new believers receive immortality, and eternity begins.

Seventh-day Adventists reject this interpretation as being contrary to the Scriptures since it proposes a kingdom on earth-ruled directly by Christ-composed of glorified saints (the Church) on the one hand, and non-glorified Jews and nations on the other! Such a scheme creates the anomaly of offering grace to both Jews and Gentiles *after* human probation has closed.

The Bible is clear that the mediatorial ministry of Jesus ceases just prior to His coming (cf Heb 7:25; Rev 8:3-5; 15:1, 5-8). No subsequent Millennial age can provide another chance for salvation when Christ's ministry terminates in the heavenly temple. The day of grace will then be over for both Jew and Gentile. Christ *brings His reward* with Him when He comes—not a further extension of grace (Rev 22:12).

Furthermore, the destruction wrought upon the earth by the seven last plagues (Rev 16), and the slaying of the world's impenitent by Christ's glorious return (cf Rev 19:19-21; 2 Thess 2:8; Isa 11:4) renders the earth unfit for a millennial reign. Since Jesus promised to return from heaven for His people (John 14:1-3), Seventh-day Adventists believe Christ and His redeemed will share in a millennial reign *in heaven* (1 Thess 4:16-18; Rev 20:6) at the close of which the final executive Judgment will occur (Rev 20:11-13) together with the destruction of the lost and the re-creation of the earth as the eternal home of the redeemed (Rev 20:14, 15; 22:1-5; Matt 5:5).

"Put on the whole armour of God," the apostle Paul appeals, "that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph 6:11). As deceptive errors continue to multiply, ensnaring the unwary, it is urgent that every end-time Christian learn to use sound principles of interpretation, thereby fortifying his mind with the protecting truths of God's Word.