

LAST THINGS

We believe in the Second Coming and ultimate victory of Jesus Christ.

This belief is expressed in the doctrine of Last Things. Differing interpretations of what the Bible teaches about Last Things are held today by honest persons of faith within our fellowship. The two predominant interpretations in the Churches of God are premillennialism and amillennialism.

Premillennialism teaches that the return of Christ will be preceded by certain signs including the preaching of the gospel to all nations, a great apostasy, the rapture of the dead and living Christians, the appearance of the Antichrist, and a great tribulation. Then Christ will return and establish his kingdom on earth for 1000 years, the millennium. This is followed by a rebellion led by Satan; then the ultimate triumph of Christ's initial coming will reach its final fulfillment.

Amillennialism teaches that Christ—in his death on the cross and resurrection—has won the decisive victory over sin, death, and Satan. For amillennialists, the kingdom of God is both a present reality and a future hope. The present period will be brought to a climax by the dramatic return of Christ. They look to the Second Coming which will be preceded by certain signs such as: the preaching of the gospel to all nations, a great apostasy and tribulation, and the coming of the Anti-christ. Since many of these signs are already present to the amillennialist, the next step is the return of Christ, the general resurrection, and the ascension of all believers.

These two views differ somewhat on the order, duration, and significance of these Last Things. What is held in common, however, forms the basis of the following teachings on Last Things.

We believe that Almighty God will bring history to its proper close in his way and in his time.

Our task is to build Christ's Church on earth until that day comes, enlisting and preparing persons for everlasting life with God and God's people (Mark 13:33-37).

Jesus warned against speculations about the end times and temptations to fix dates. "Of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only" (Matthew 24:36 KJV; also Mark 13:32; Acts 1:7).

We believe that the Scriptures do speak of times and events which are part of the movement of history toward the fulfillment of the purposes of God.

Jesus indicated that there are signs of his coming, in order to reassure his followers of this hope. There will be false Christs (Matthew 24:5, 24). There will be wars and rumors of wars (Matthew 24:6). The Gospel will be preached in all the world (Matthew 24:14; Mark 13:10). There will be convulsions in nature; there will be famines and pestilences (Matthew 24:7).

These signs and others have appeared at various times and in varying degrees to alert us and keep us vigilant. But we cannot pinpoint the time of Christ's coming. The Bible does not answer

all our questions about Last Things. It reveals what we need to know about God and his plan for the world. It is clear about our need for redemption through Christ, the nature of the life to be lived under the power of the indwelling Spirit, and the assurance and hope of everlasting life.

We believe the message of the end times is always one of victory and fulfillment for the Christian and the ultimate triumph of God's kingdom.

There will be a tribulation, but we are not to fear. There is victory in Christ's overcoming power (John 16:33). The messages of the world will become confusing, but there is certainty in God's Word (Luke 21:33). In Jesus Christ, God will consummate all things when "the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign forever and ever" (Revelation 11:15 KJV).

Righteousness will reign (2 Peter 3:13); there will be no imperfection (Revelation 21:27); there will be no night (Revelation 22:5); there will be no sorrow or pain or death (Revelation 21:4). God will dwell with his people in the beauty and unity of God's great plan (Revelation 21:3).

We believe the mission of God's people until that day is to be salt and light in the world.

Although we are "looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13 KJV), there is work for us to do. "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:3 NIV). To look for Christ's return and its consummating events is not to retreat from life and abandon our mission as salt and light in the world (Matthew 5:13 -16).

Peter sensed the pain of his people in the turbulent times of their Christian pilgrimage. He was aware of the impact of persecution and admonished the saints to be faithful and steadfast. He encouraged them with the words, "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in, the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace, with him" (2 Peter 3:11 -14 NIV; also 2 Peter 3:8-18). "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as [God] is pure" (1 John 3:3 NIV).

We believe in the bodily resurrection of believers.

Those who are alive and "in Christ" at the time of his triumphant return will be drawn unto him. As Christ was raised from the dead, "the first fruits of them that slept" (1 Corinthians 15:20 KJV), the dead in Christ shall rise also to share in the culmination of God's eternal kingdom. It is the final sharing in the promise of eternal life. "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable" (1 Corinthians 15:19 KJV). "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" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 KJV).

This will not simply be a resurrection of our spirit. It will be a bodily resurrection, but we will have a changed body, a glorified body. "The body is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:42-44 NIV). And those alive at the time of Christ's return will also be changed. "For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable" (1 Corinthians 15:53 NIV; also 15:52).

It is through this bodily resurrection that Christ's ultimate promise is fulfilled. "When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory'" (1 Corinthians 15:54 NIV).

We believe judgment will accompany Christ's return.

This will occur "when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed" (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10 RSV).

Judgment has been committed to Christ (John 5:22; Acts 17:31). Some judgments are past. Christ in his coming as the light of the world has judged the world's darkness. As Christians we are not condemned, because we have been pardoned by accepting and believing in Christ (John 3:18). There is, however, judgment of deeds for all (Matthew 16:27; 1 Corinthians 3:13-15).

Christians need not fear judgment. Instead they should welcome it, because it is the occasion for their final vindication in the Lord (2 Thessalonians 1:10; 1 Corinthians 3:10-13). God knows our love, and will deal with us fairly. "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25 KJV). The salvation and worthiness of the believer is already assured by God's action. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9 KJV).

The message of the Last Things is a call to a living hope. It makes us alive to our mission and assures us of ultimate victory in Christ. When all things have been placed under Christ's rule, we shall give thanks to God "who has qualified [us] to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:12-13 NIV).