

Do we need a Special Ethics for the Last Days?

Thomas Schirmmacher and Thomas K. Johnson¹

In hard or uncertain times we recognize the urgency of God's unchanging will

Churches, evangelists, and even politicians love to base their imperatives on the argument that we are living in the Last Days. And speculation that we can know that we are truly in the last hours or weeks seems to recur every few years. But is that biblical? Must we really know whether God is intending to inflict judgment or bestow grace, whether he will end the world this week or in a coming time, when we develop evangelistic strategies, make plans to love our neighbors, or live our lives to the glory of God? No! On the contrary, we must continue to proclaim the Gospel as we have always done in order to prevent judgment while we also live our entire lives for God's honor! The Bible preaches no special eschatological ethics.

To express it in other words: the specific ethics for the Last Days are the very same ethics of the Kingdom of God which commenced with the Coming of Christ (Luke 10:9-11; 21:31-32). In view of the approaching judgment and the return of Christ (Acts 17:31; 1Thess 5:1-3), this ethical system has applied for centuries and will not suddenly change in the twenty-first century.

Do we really need a new ethical system for the Last Days? Must we locate our epoch on a prophetic time line in order to do God's will? No, for God's will, as revealed in Scripture, always applies, whether the situation is worsening or improving.

Isn't it really contradictory for Christians to claim to adhere to the Bible while calculating a program for the Return of Christ, even though Scripture and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself very clearly insist that no one except God the Father knows the time or the hour (Acts 1:7; Matt 24:36-51; Mark 13:32-37; Luke 12:35-46)! If we believe in the principle of using Scripture to interpret Scripture, we should apply Christ's warning to every eschatological text. Still, let us participate in the discussion: what would be the consequences for our ethics, if we did know that the world were to end soon?

The apostle Paul gives one of the most dramatic descriptions of the 'perilous times' of the last days (2 Tim 3:1-4:8). We could ask why Paul would require Timothy to act in a concrete manner in difficult times that lay in a far distant future, but let us ignore that problem and assume that this text indeed refers to the end of human history. Men will become selfish, slanderers, seducers "always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth" (vs. 7), clinging to a powerless superficial Christianity (vs. 5). Persecution will be an everyday affair (3:11-12), and things will continue to get worse (vs. 13). "For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Tim 4:3-4).

What conclusion does Paul draw from these predictions? Rather than developing a special ethical system, he confirms the fundamental principles of the Christian lifestyle which have

¹ This essay was originally written by Thomas Schirmmacher in German, translated from German to English by Cambron Teupe, then revised and expanded by Thomas K. Johnson.

always applied and will continue to apply in the future. In this situation of perilous times he said, “Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ... But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry” (2 Tim 4:2&5).

Speaking specifically of ethical norms for difficult times, Paul admonishes Timothy: “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it” (2 Tim 3:14), that is, Timothy is to live according to Scripture. The basic significance of Scripture, which was inspired by God through his Spirit, for salvation, doctrine and ethics (2 Tim 3:14-17), is emphasized in the context of future difficulties and judgment. Timothy does not need any special knowledge of the future, only familiarity with the Bible and its norms “so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17). In the Great Commandment, Jesus admonishes the disciples to work: “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:20). Jesus’ ethics suffice – from the Crucifixion until his return.

The principles described here for evangelization apply equally for the rest of Biblical-Christian ethics. Whether or for how long we are living in the Last Days, the commandment to love, the Ten Commandments, and other central ethical principles such those defined in Romans 12:1-2 or 2 Tim. 3:16-17 remain unchanged. God’s assistance and directions for our lives apply whether we live in the best of times or the worst, and whether judgment or revival is pending.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Paul discusses the lives of the believers facing the “Day of the Lord” (vs. 2), a completely unexpected time which will come like a thief in the night. The Christian can only watch rather than sleep. Paul’s ethical system for the Return of Christ consists in being sober, in watching, in admonishing and building up one another (vs. 11), in putting on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of the hope of salvation (vs. 8). No one who lives this way will be unprepared for the Day, and nothing indicates that we require any sort of special eschatological ethics that is different from the teaching of the entire New Testament.

In his sermons on the Last Days, Jesus exhorts the disciples to watch (Matt 24:32-25:13). He uses the metaphor of the unexpected thief in the night (Matt 24:43) whose time is unknown to the master of the house (Matt 24:44; 24:50; 25:13). The only preventive is to wake and not become lazy. Jesus expects his disciples only to live watchfully, whether in the first century or the twenty-first. Nothing indicates that he preached any sort of rules for the Last Days other than those he proclaimed to his first century audience.

Similar texts which associate the Last Days with basic exhortations applicable to all believers appear frequently in the New Testament.

God can repeal or at least postpone the proclaimed judgment if people repent.

Is the promise given in 2 Chronicles 7:14 no longer valid for the Last Days? “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” Of course it is always valid, even when a nation or even the whole world is

ripe for judgment (The judgment is described in verse 13). And the prophet Jeremiah applied this principle from 2 Chronicles to the situation of the people of God being under God's judgment in exile in Babylon. Jeremiah taught God's people, who had experienced extreme tribulation, "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jeremiah 29:7).

The Old Testament gives us many examples of judgments announced by the prophets but postponed due to repentance. The Book of Jonah provides the best known example. The prophet preached that Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days (Jonah 3:4), but the Assyrians' repentance reverted God's judgment. Jonah, angry as he was, had already known how God would act: "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jonah 4:2). Jonah would have preferred God to judge Nineveh, just as many modern Christians prefer to preach judgment and devastation rather than the Gospel. The Church Father John Chrysostom (c. 347-407), speaking of Jonah in his 'Homily on Repentance', emphasizes that Christian proclamation often seems to devastate hope, but never truly disintegrates it, for the Gospel points to the true hope which lies only in God.

Prophetic announcements which God had not confirmed by oath could always be reverted or changed. Only when he had sworn to destroy was the judgment irreversible. When he swears to punish Eli's family, then the High Priest's family is lost: "Therefore the Lord, the God of Israel, declares: 'I promised that members of your family would minister before me forever.' But now the Lord declares: 'Far be it from me! Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained'" (2 Sam 2:30). The original promise depended on conditions, but the oath formula "Far be it from me" makes his pronouncement irrevocable.

In Jonah 1:2, God commands the prophet to preach the message in Nineveh. The command is repeated after Jonah is liberated from the whale's belly (3:2) and carried out with classical missionary methods: Jonah preaches and the citizens of the city believe. The proclamation of the coming judgment can also be evangelistic – Peter preached 'only' judgment at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36) as did Paul in Athens (Act 17:14-31), but both then preach grace, when their audiences repent. Jonah 3:8-10 uses the term 'turn away', otherwise used for Israel's repentance from sin to return to God!² Jonah 3:5-9 describes a mass conversion by the Gentiles seldom paralleled in Israel's history. The story ends with the joyful note (3:10): "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened." Jesus refers to the Assyrians' reaction in his reproach of his Jewish contemporaries: "For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. . . . The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and now something greater than Jonah is here" (Luke 11:30&32; see also Matt. 12:41). How embarrassing! Gentiles became a role model for the Jews.

Jonah was, obviously, a good theologian, for he knew that God was compassionate towards the Gentiles, not just to the Israelites, and this knowledge infuriated him: "He prayed to the Lord, "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity"(Jonah 4:2). He had fled from his assignment for theological reasons, not for

²See: David F. Wells. *Turning to God: Biblical Conversion in the Modern World*. Paternoster: Exeter; Baker Book House: Grand Rapids (MI), 1989. p. 31.

personal ones. He could not bear the fact that Gentiles would receive the same grace as the Jews.

Using a gourd plant, God, however, provided the prophet with a picture of his relationship to the Gentiles, concluding the book with a justification for world missions. “And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?” (4:11).

Examples for the repeal of a proclaimed judgment		
Person concerned	Proclamation	Repeal because of repentance
Hezekiah	2 Kings 20:1-11; 2 Chron 32:24-26	2 Kings 20:1-11; 2 Chron 32:24-33
Jonah	Jonah 3:4	Jonah 3:5-10
Israel under Hezekiah	2 Chron 30:13-20	2 Chron 30:13-20
The Jews after the Crucifixion	Luke 20:13-16 (The Son’s death to lead to destruction of Jerusalem)	Acts 2:40 (The judgment postponed for a generation)

Even when God has proclaimed judgment, he sometimes apparently revokes his decision, as the example from Jonah proves. When he has sworn to do something, however, there is can be no repeal. God’s unconceivable grace expresses itself in the fact that, in contrast to his grace, judgments are seldom confirmed by oath. His covenant with Noah, that the earth would never again be destroyed by flood, was confirmed by an oath (Gen. 8:20-9:17). The history of the Israelites provides other examples. Both God’s covenant of common grace (at Noah’s time) and his covenant of special grace (with Israel) are mentioned in Isaiah 54:9,10: “To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed.”

What is the significance of an oath? We must search Scripture for the answer, for the oath is a typical Judeo-Christian principle. Now, if God and Jesus swear oaths more frequently than anyone else, the oath surely does not serve to distinguish truth from falsehood! It is God Who swears the most in the Bible, followed by the men of faith in both Testaments. How can truth be doubtful, when God Himself speaks? Where does the Bible claim that an oath is only necessary when the truth is in question?

So why swear? Let’s look at several examples. According to Hebrews 7:20-21, the Old Testament Aaronic priesthood was not based on an oath, but the eternal priesthood of Christ according to the order of Melchizedek was (see Psalm 110:4): “And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, ²¹ but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: “You are a priest forever.”’” “The Aaronic priesthood could be abolished, because its validity had not been confirmed by oath, whereas Jesus’ priesthood, ratified by oath, will never end.

God's oath to Abraham is justified in Hebrews 6:16-18 with the following words: "People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. ¹⁷Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. ¹⁸God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged." God's oath ratifies the immutability of his decision. In Isaiah 45:23-24, he describes his oath as a "word ... that will not be revoked." Psalm 110:4 says: "The LORD has sworn, and will not change his mind." Psalm 132:11 describes God's oath to David in similar words: "The LORD swore an oath to David, a sure oath he will not revoke;" and David uses the same terminology in Psalm 119:106: "I have taken an oath and confirmed it."

In other words: judgment not confirmed by a divine oath can be cancelled, and a judgment whose date has not been set with an oath can be postponed. God frequently applies this distinction when men repent, call on his mercy, let themselves be reconciled to him, and begin to do his will.

The Church has hope in the face of judgment

The Church only proclaims judgment because of its hope. Judgment provides excellent opportunities for hope in prayer, proclamation in word and deed, and provides us with opportunities to both grow in faith and to test our faith.

Job refers to a tree apparently cut down and dried out, an image also used in Old Testament prophecy: "At least there is hope for a tree: if it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail" (Job 14:7).

We therefore have only one road to renewal of political and social conditions. As essential as it is to refer to the Law of God in order to elucidate what has gone wrong and to clarify God's will, we must remember: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14). The Church can then truly pray for society and for government. Let us hope that God must not conclude: "I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found no one" (Eze. 22:30), as he did in Israel.

When judgment is due, Christians need not spread tribulation panic or resignation, for we can pray for our people, as Abraham did.

Many Christians have lost hope for our world because they see only negative developments, but hope means not being impelled by what we see, but by faith in God's sovereignty and his grace. The first Christians brought hope to the Roman Empire, when conditions were no better than they are now – on the contrary! And Eastern Europe shows us that God can even judge anti-Christian powers in order to give the Gospel new opportunities.

Iniquity may be full, but the Church can delay the judgment

God can wait patiently while man's iniquity increases: "For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you warned them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you gave them into the hands of the neighboring peoples" (Neh. 9:30). But when "iniquity is full," his patience is at an end, and he inflicts the heaviest of penalties such as

epidemics, war, death or exile, for the degree of sin increases as time passes, especially in a people over several generations.

Thus, God tells Abraham in Gen. 15:16 that he must wait four generations before his descendants can return to Canaan “for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.” Shortly before to Israel’s entry into the Promised Land, he reminds the people that he has not chosen to give the land to them because of their own righteousness, but because of Canaanites’ wickedness (Deut. 9:4-5).

Jesus admonishes the scribes and the Pharisees in the same way: “Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!” (Matt. 23:32), and Paul, speaking of the Jews in 1 Thessalonians 2:15,16 says, “They displease God and are hostile to everyone¹⁶ in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.” The Israelites’ century-long persecution of their own prophets culminated in the Crucifixion (see the Parable of the husbandmen in Matt. 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; and Luke 20:9-19), but the Jews continued to add to their guilt. The ‘wrath’ of which Paul speaks probably means the destruction of Jerusalem and the defeat of the Jews in 70 A. D. God held back the judgment for many centuries as their hearts became harder, but even after the Crucifixion, he waited a full generation (Acts 2:40: “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”) before carrying out his word (See also: Matt. 24:34; 23:36; Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32. See also ‘generation’ in Matt 12:41-45; Luke 17:25).

Speaking of Babylon, God says, “for the sins of their ancestors; they are not to rise to inherit the land and cover the earth with their cities. (Isa. 14:21). He prevents the wicked from taking over the world, as he did in the Flood and at the Tower of Babel. (“If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.” Gen 11:6) The banishment from Eden that followed the Fall prevents Sin from becoming too powerful and lasting eternally (Gen. 3:22, 23).

In the same way, God is willing to spare Sodom, should a sufficient number of righteous people still live there (Gen 18:20-33; see also 19:29) – a number he reduces several times at Abraham’s entreaty. Sodom, however, has become so godless that only Lot is left. Jerusalem is no better in Jeremiah 5:1: “Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city.”

This means that believers can defer the fullness of wickedness through supplication.

“Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed.” (Prov 11:11) This promises that a righteous group of people can postpone or repeal judgment over their society. This is the principle we see in the life of Abraham. Abraham’s insistent plea for Sodom and Gomorra (Gen. 18:16-33) demonstrates clearly the importance of godly people can be for a godless society. God would have spared the cities for the sake of only ten righteous inhabitants (Gen 18:32,35).

It is thus that the most terrible thing that can happen to a society occurs when God can find no more believers in its midst, no godly people willing to fill the gap and pray: “I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found no one.” (Exe. 22:30).

As a matter of fact, the continuing existence of our godless world until the Second Coming of Christ depends on the godly people who live in it and on the growth of the Kingdom of God, as Jesus proclaims in the Parable of the Tares and the Wheat (Matt 14:24-30.36-42). In order to spare the wheat – the Kingdom of God – God continues to spare the weeds. When the wheat is ripe and the world is full of it, the weeds will be destroyed.

These principles apply not only to peoples or churches but also to each individual. God takes our development into account. Two people may commit the same sin, but one may be taking a step away from more serious sin, while the other is descending into deeper rebellion. God punishes some of Israel's kings, for example, for introducing idolatry with a single image but commends others who ignored a multitude of idols, because they had eliminated major, widely spread idolatry. (See Asa in 2 Chron. 15:17: "Although he did not remove the high places from Israel, Asa's heart was fully committed to the Lord all his life.")

The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, Matt. 13:24-30 and 36-43

²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷ "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

²⁸ "'An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

²⁹ "'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

³⁶ Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

³⁷ He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

⁴⁰ "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴² They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear."

The meaning of the parable is easy enough to understand, since Jesus interprets it for the disciples Himself – and is a good guide to interpreting the rest of Jesus' parables.

The story of the Kingdom of God commences with the sowing of the good seed on the field of the world through Jesus Christ. Out of this good seed, the children of the Kingdom grow. At the same time, Satan sows his evil seed, out of which the children of wicked one grow. Evil matures and becomes increasingly evident, but the good seed matures even more.

When does the story of God's Kingdom on earth end? When will Jesus, the Son of Man let the righteous blaze forth and gather the 'lawless' ones to be punished? Not in a premillennial period, but at the end of human history at the time of the Last Judgment.

As long as the Kingdom of God is growing and the children of the Kingdom are increasing, the time of evil will not end. A Christian who notices only the growth of wickedness ignores the fact that its development is only permitted in order to safeguard the growth of the good seed.

The suffering of Christ's Church does not interfere with the growth and final success of God's Kingdom – on the contrary! In this parable especially, Jesus points out clearly that both the Kingdom of God and the power of evil are maturing, but that the weeds can only last as long as the wheat is growing. Evil can only mature, because God is letting his Church grow and mature. If it were not for the Church in the world, the final judgment would fall (Gen 18:22-23).

Conclusions

Biblical Christians must not deny that we are in the Last Days. There is a sense in which we have been in the Last Days since the time of Jesus, and we simply do not know for sure if Jesus will return in power and glory today, in a few days, or after many generations. Maybe this is the last of week of planet earth as we know it. But that does not change the content of our biblical ethics; it only raises the urgency or zeal which we should have in following the commands God has given us in the Bible. Regardless of when Jesus returns, the Ten Commandments are still God's law and Jesus' teaching on loving God and our neighbor remains the same. The great missions commission is still the priority of the church, which has frequently been carried out in the middle of perilous times. And at least since the time of Abraham believers have all been called on to pray for God's mercy to fall on our neighbors, even if they deserve God's wrath for atrocious sins.

This means there is no special ethics of the last days that are different from normal Christian, God-fearing ethics. We should study and discuss the biblical texts that promise the return of Jesus; this should give us great hope. We should not let our slightly different interpretations of these promises divert us from being zealous to follow what God has given us to do until Jesus comes.