
St. Paul's Red Door Chronicle

Volume 14, Issue 6

June/July 2011

From the Rector:

I write this column two days after the prediction of California-based radio evangelist Walter Camping failed to pass. If you hadn't heard, Camping was convinced that the faithful would be "raptured up" on 21 May at 6PM, leaving the rest behind to face a period of tribulation. While doomsday predictions seem rather marginal in the life of the church, the attention paid to Camping and his followers by the media has highlighted one of the most interesting theological disagreements that the majority of Christians have with the Christian minority view often called "fundamentalism" (yes, despite the fact that living in the American South might give us a skewed perspective, fundamentalists account for a rather small minority in Christianity worldwide).

Despite the fact that we Episcopalians (as well as most mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians) don't talk so much about "the end of the world", it is important that we figure out what we believe about it. This is because *eschatology*—or "last things"—is such a pervasive theme in the Bible. Most early Christians believed that the end would come in their lifetimes. Indeed, one of the earliest crises in the church stemmed from the fact that Christ did not return in a timely fashion.

St. Paul writes his *First Epistle to the Thessalonians* specifically to address the fear that members of that community felt when some of their number had died before Christ's return. To these early Christians Paul writes the comforting words which have unfortunately been hijacked by marginal Christian movements ever since:

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope...For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thess. 4:13, 15-18)

These ought to be words of comfort, but they have been forced into rather strange, convoluted theories about eschatological timelines which were popularized in nineteenth century Evangelical circles. Such timelines tend to separate the general resurrection (that is, the resurrection of the faithful) from Christ's return and establishment of a new heaven and earth. In between these events, those who hold this view (called *dispensational premillennialism*) posit a period in which the unfaithful have been "left behind" and face horrible torment. Thus, the comforting, hopeful words of scripture have been twisted to create fear.

The reality is that for the first nineteen centuries of church history, there were a number of views about the precise timeline of the "end times". Some (particularly many of the Church Fathers of the second and third centuries) held that there would be a literal or metaphorical *millennium* in which Christ would reign before the general resurrection. Others (notably Augustine) believed that Christ's return and the resurrection would happen concurrently. The latter tends to be a more popular view throughout traditional Western Christianity (including Anglicanism), but there are others (especially Calvinists of various stripes) who would affirm the former.

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BIBLE SCHOOL 2011

July 10--13 5:30 – 8:30
at First Presbyterian

First Presbyterian and St. Paul's are joining forces once again for a while of a Bible school – for all ages.

Volunteers are needed for all areas:

Skit – performance and preparation

Food – preparation, serving, etc...

Group Leaders and Crafts

If you're interested in volunteering, please call **Suzanne Magouyrk, 613-3836**

Make plans to join in the fun
July 10-13 5:30pm – 8:30pm

HOW ARE WE DOING?

**Average Cost Per Week
to Operate St. Paul's: \$4590.35**

Pledge/Plate Giving Per Week:

May 1-May 7 \$3605.45

May 8-14 \$2738.83

May 15-21 \$4120.83

May 22-28 \$2051.41

Average Giving Per Week: \$3129.13

BIBLE SCHOOL MEETING

There will be a Vacation Bible School planning meeting on Sunday, June 12th at 12:30pm at First Presbyterian. Please bring both your calendars and your ideas. Pizza will be provided.

Our Graduates

Cory Emerson	Lyon College
T.J. Guajardo	Lyon College
Gary Sevier	Lyon College
Amy O'Rourke	Lyon College
Mason Magouyrk	Batesville High School
Evan Fry	Batesville High School
Teran Jones	Batesville High School
Casey Carroll Goff	Episcopal High School
Chika Okolo	Arkansas State University
Mary Beth Dunlap	Arkansas State University
Amy Plaster	Arkansas State University

USHER SCHEDULE June 2011

5– Martha Sue Smith & Scott Lien
12– Carol & Elmer Heringer
19– Deborah & Jim Johnson
26– Bill Olson & Steve Stalker

July 2011

3– Kirk Warden & Gary Perkey
10– Paul Hance & Tim Dunlap
17– Pat Mulick & Tim Lindblom
24– Alan Bufford & Dwight Ford
31– Lee Conditt & Jim Cargill



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In any event, a case can be made for either as a valid interpretation of scripture. What is, in my opinion, without a compelling basis in scripture or in the Church's faithful meditation on the same is the concept of a rapture followed by a tribulation of some sort. To get *there* there has to be a great deal of exegetical hand-waving and the stitching together of disparate bits of scripture one would not naturally consider to be related.

I am not belaboring this point to boast about how we read scripture better than fundamentalists (I fear that Anglicans and those of other mainline flavors of Christianity too often know less about the scriptures than our fundamentalist brothers and sisters). I belabor the point because it effects how we understand God more broadly. What does it say about a god who would, before his final judgment of the world, permit a large number of people (a majority of the earth's population according to most dispensational premillennialists) to suffer without the hope of salvation? The now infamous Mister Camping taught that those who were "left behind" would have already been judged, and thus would have no recourse to God's mercy, and this is not his view alone, but the view of most who would argue for a similar eschatological timeline whether or not they were so bold as to propose a date on which it all "goes down".

This, it seems to me, is to limit God's Grace. I would not dispute the reality of a coming judgment or the existence of hell (though many good Christians may), but to suggest that the world is over before it's really over, as it were, suggests that a rather capricious god is in charge of our ultimate fate. It says "God cannot save anyone else, because some undefined date has been reached." This denies the God to whom Jesus was referring in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16), who continues to hire workers at the eleventh hour and pays them a full wage. To suggest that God isn't really like that is to be like the day-long worker who grumbles about how unfair the vineyard owner was. Deep down, we who think we're among the elect would prefer a God of judgment to a God of mercy, whether we admit it or not. But God's justice *is* mercy, and God will save whomever He will.

When we stop trying to fit God's actions into a paradigm that makes sense to our rather skewed moral sensibility we can begin to be open to possibility. We begin to see that God's Will is not ours to evaluate; it is ours to discern as best we can and follow, knowing that we cannot in this life fully discern it, and thus are unable to tie God's hands with our expectations. Above all, we must remember that the word given us in scripture is indeed *Good News*. It is news which gives us hope, not fear, for Christ's coming Kingdom. Ultimately, the upshot of Christian eschatology is not about horrible tribulation, but about a new heaven and a new earth and the gracious reign of the Triune God. Let us wait eagerly for that Kingdom and never miss an opportunity to share the hope that is in us, because the world *needs* hope (not fear) and we have within us the greatest reason ever to approach the future with optimism and confidence.

Yours in service to the Gospel,
John+

