

# What Shall We Believe? by Aurelia T. Fule

Aurelia Takacs Fule is a former staff member of the Program Agency of the United Presbyterian Church and later Associate for Faith and Order in the Theology and Worship Ministry Unity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She is retired and living in Santa Fe, N.M. What Shall We Believe? was copyrighted by Aurelia T. Fule in 1987 and is used by permission. This text was prepared for Religion Online by John C. Purdy.

A detailed analysis and critique, by a Reformed theologian, of what preachers like Jerry Falwell are saying about 'the last things.'

## Introduction: The Last Things Are Coming

Those who care about peacemaking and alternatives to a nuclear holocaust -- who believe that God loves the world and expects us to do all we can to preserve and enhance life on earth -- have a responsibility to pay attention not only to what the "last things" preachers are saying but also to what the mainstream of Christian tradition says about "last things."

## I. The Last Things — and the Kingdom of God

The basic concepts. Eschatology: the differences in the Jewish and Christian tradition. Salvation: who shall be saved? The Kingdom of God: is it now or in the future?

## II. What Does the Strange Talk Mean?

The basic terms. Apocalypticism. Dispensationalism. Dispensation,. Chiliasm and Millennialism, Rapture and Tribulation – their history and meaning.

## III. What Is the "New Teaching"?

The Pre-millennialist picture: the Second Coming of Christ. Is this really God's message to us? The dispensational interpretation of Scripture: the dangers of a closed-in future.

## IV. Time Is Running Out

Signs of the times. Armageddon. hat makes people think we may be coming to the end? Significant changes in understanding since Scofield published his Reference Study Bible.

## V. The Rapture

The message of the TV evangelists: the end of the world; the Tribulation; the Millennium; and the last judgment. But their God is tiny. In an age when people learn of an infinite or expanding universe, these preachers depict a tribal god on a heaven-made throne in an immensely big city!

## **VI. What Does the Reformed Tradition Say?**

The perspective of the Reformed tradition differs greatly from the millennialist picture. The Christian hope is not in an interventionist God.

## **VII. What Do Our Creeds and Confessions Say?**

The Christian gospel is not addressed to only a part of life, but to the whole of it. The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds mention four themes -- resurrection, return of Christ, judgment and eternal life -- with clarity and economy.

## **VIII: Why Should the "New Teaching" Trouble Us?**

We must be sure not to attribute dispensational doctrines to all fundamentalists. For the dispensationalists there is no hope in change, but only hope of escape.

## **Reflections**

The dispensational conclusion is that peace is not possible; prepare for war. How can people live with such a non-Christian view? This perspective has nothing to do with the permissive will of God that allows us to live with the consequences of our actions, and to strive for peace in our time.

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### **Introduction: The Last Things Are Coming**

*The disciples asked Jesus:*

*"Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? Jesus said to them, It is not for you to know times or seasons . . . . But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you . . . . (Acts 1:6-8)*

### **Introduction: The Last Things Are Coming**

There are two experiences that I would like to share with you. You may recognize in them some of your own.

Pittsburg, 1972 or '73: I am invited by two members of the church my husband serves as pastor to hear a well-known evangelist -- well-known to them. I respect and am fond of the two women who invite me, but disagree with them on many things.

The church is large, the building lovely and in excellent condition; the decoration appeals to me less than the architecture does. This is a weekday afternoon and the sanctuary is almost full.

After the service I walk out in a daze. The women introduce me to Dr. Bob (or Bill or Dick, I cannot recall), who was the great preacher. He smiles, he is polite and human-sized. Everybody smiles, lots of small talk goes on, but I am almost in shock. Did I conjure up the words I heard? Did these smiling people hear what I heard? They did not, or they would not be smiling. I

certainly am not. I do not want to have tea with the women, I want to get home. Later I try to talk it out of my system.

"It was the most cruel, inhuman thing to say; the anti-Semitism was utterly shocking, I say later." The preacher was speaking of the "last things," of war and judgment. He quoted a lot of Scripture, prophets and others, without regard to context or the message of the writer. He used single verses, or parts of verses, as if they proved what he was saying, though they did not. The end is coming, we are closer and closer to it. He dwelt at length on the horrors to come. The Jews will die by the millions. He repeated: by the millions. "It will be nothing, just nothing what Hitler did to them when compared to what God is going to do on that day." When he said that, I looked around in the church. People were listening attentively. I was shocked, but no one seemed to have shared my state.

A few days later I had to check out my sanity with the two women. Oh yes, that is what Dr. Bob -- or Bill or Dick -- said. Did I not know that God will destroy all the unbelieving Jews at the end? I was a Presbyterian minister and did not know that?

A more recent memory: a motel room in Cincinnati, 1983:

A youngish, energetic man is preaching. I am not familiar with TV preachers and do not know who he is. Before I switch in search of something else, he catches my attention.

"You think about the weapons we are piling up. The bombs and missiles stored, more and more produced each year. You ask questions: Do we need these? Are they not dangerous?" No wonder I stayed with the channel. Here was a serious TV preacher. He walked up and down, asking probing questions.

Then came the punch line that left me reeling. "You are believers, therefore you have nothing to fear." We have twice as many weapons as a few years ago, and will have twice this many again in a few more years. One day we will use them, he went on. The day of the final battle is not too far off. But the war, when it comes, will be God's war. This earth will become a ball of fire, but just before that happens the Lord will claim his own. We will be raptured out of danger, every one of us. Therefore there is nothing to fear. The unbelievers will perish, but we will be with the Lord.

I was shaken by the monumental irresponsibility of the preacher. If your conscience troubles you, just tell it that you will be safe. Make all the weapons or all the profit from it -- you are safe. You need not worry about unbelieving family and friends, or the life of humanity. *You* are safe. What else could matter?

The main issues, the threads and connections of recent teachings about the "last times," were present in these two experiences. As I listened to the two preachers I was aware of the issues, but only now do I see the connections, the significance and relationship of the themes and the scale of their influence on American society today.

First, there is the bone-chilling anti-Semitism which no one protested -- neither church members nor Jews. The bloody imagination of slaughtering most of the Jews seems not to matter as Jerry Falwell, one of the chief proponents of such views, receives the key to the city of Jerusalem on his visit with Israeli leaders.

Then there is the "theological" support for an inflated military budget, weapons development, even destruction of life on earth. All this is presented as being on God's side -- taking God's side in the final battle to destroy God's creation.

All of us who care about peacemaking and alternatives to a nuclear holocaust -- those of us who still believe that God loves the world God created and expects us to do all we can to preserve and enhance life on earth -- have a responsibility to pay attention not only to what these preachers are saying but also to what our own tradition teaches about "the last things."

# What Shall We Believe? by Aurelia T. Fule

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## I. The Last Things — and the Kingdom of God

The areas of discussion and disagreement among Christians over these issues and their consequences are numerous. We will focus on the theme so favored in our days: the last things. In doing so, we will need to look closely at a doctrine that underlies the whole disagreement: the kingdom of God. First, what do we say in our family of the faith?

**Eschatology** is the branch of theology concerned with the final events in human or world history. The word comes from the Greek adjective *eschatos*, meaning "last," frequently used in the New Testament (as in II Timothy 3:1, "... in the last days there will come times of stress," but also in such familiar usage as Matthew 19:30: "But many that are first will be last, and the last first"). Christianity and many other religions teach about the last things. It is a universal human experience that we come to our own personal end in history. The world, and history as we know it, may or will come to an end also. If so, how? Is there anything beyond that end? How do we know what to expect?

For Christians the central event in history is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This event sheds light on what went before: God's election, covenant and law -- that is, choosing, teaching, and preparing a people for the coming of the One. The present and future are seen in the light of this event also. We have been shown what human beings are called to be. When we glimpse the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, we glimpse the future God has for us.

Eschatology is used in two ways. We speak of "last" meaning end or purpose (for this the New Testament often used the word *telos*); and of "last" meaning completion, like the last act of a drama. The biblical purpose, with varying degrees of clarity, is the same in both Testaments: that humanity may dwell in the presence of God, live under the reign of God in peace, justice and love.

Judaism pictured the last act pointing to the Messiah, the day of judgment, and the messianic rule: a perfect and peaceful future. Hope here looks to future fulfillment.

The New Testament differs on this point. What God wills to accomplish has already begun in Christ. Eschatology, what will happen in the future, is rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. From that memory the church looks to the return in glory of the crucified Lord. According to all the historic churches, the last act has four features:

- resurrection
- return of Christ -- "second coming"
- judgment
- life eternal

These elements echo through many texts. A general agreement develops throughout the New Testament that these are the themes that belong to God's purpose for creation coming to fulfillment in the last act. And there is a consistent New Testament silence concerning where, when or how this will happen. Such a script is not for us to know. Signs of the times are to be watched until the cross and resurrection. Afterwards, because the central event has taken place in Jesus Christ, signs will not add anything.

But the New Testament's agreement about the elements and the silence concerning details does not mean no ambiguity remains about related matters. Two points of controversy are indicated already in the Scriptures. A split over particularity/universality developed concerning the hope of salvation. Who shall be saved? God's particular people, the Jews who recognize the risen Lord? So thought the Jewish congregation in Jerusalem. Or all the people, even those not Jewish? So thought Paul and the Gentile converts who formed or joined congregations. Who was right? In a way both were. God has been preparing the Jews and everyone else for salvation.

Another point debated was the time: is salvation, or the kingdom present now or is it still future? On the one hand, salvation and the kingdom form a present reality with the outpouring of the Spirit, according to the Fourth Gospel. On the other, faith needs hope. To be reconciled does not mean that redemption is completed in us here and now, said Paul and others in the New Testament. Both are true; the problem is one of proportions. Is it more present than future? Is it more future than present? At different times the church moved the emphasis from one to the other. Problems arose when some were unwilling or unable to live with the dynamics of both and chose an either/or answer. Because this either/or still tends to divide Christians, we need to look at the biblical picture of the kingdom of God and point to some interpretations.

**The kingdom of God** is a term frequently used in the first three Gospels. It is not defined because the hearers were familiar with it. Yahweh is king for the psalmists, the prophets and even in earlier tradition, so it made sense to talk of God's kingdom. The term speaks not of a place, but of God who is sovereign over all. The earth is covered with kingdoms, but the day will come when God's kingdom, now hidden but known to the righteous, will be revealed for

all people to see. In the post-exilic writings (sixth century B.C. and later) this hope is joined to the hope of a Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Man, to whom authority is given by God. After the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus begins his public ministry, saying "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15, Matt. 4:17).

The nearness of the kingdom is revealed not only in Jesus' words, but also in his actions: healing, casting out demons, performing miracles or signs. He not only signals the kingdom in his person, the kingdom is here. The good news is not only the message of Jesus, but Jesus is the message. We are called and enabled to enter the kingdom through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

The kingdom that is ushered in by Christ culminates in his cross and resurrection. It does not come by might, but by divine self-giving. Here the meaning of the kingdom is revealed, yet remains a mystery. The kingdom is here because the work of Christ brought it in, yet he taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come." It is here, yet it is to come. The kingdom is bound to its king. The early church hears: "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Christ is king on earth and in heaven. The believer participates in the kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ. But the disclosure of the kingdom for all to see is still in the future, it awaits the end of time and the return of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:11).

Preaching in Acts shows that to preach Jesus Christ crucified and risen again is to preach the kingdom of God. The church is not the kingdom, but Christ acts within the church and guides it, where and when it will be guided, by the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 4:20) so that the church witnesses to the coming kingdom and continues to pray: "Your kingdom come." This special nature of the kingdom being here already and yet still coming, and the call of the church to pray and become participants in the kingdom, not to create the kingdom, has been difficult for some people. When the church was not lively enough with hope to live in the tension of the kingdom already here -- but not yet -- it missed the mark. It came to premature conclusions by stressing one set of texts and forgetting others.

There were Christians through the ages who thought they had discovered signs of the imminent coming of Christ, who will usher in the kingdom. The year 1000 was expected with terror and anticipation. Would not that be the year of Christ's return? The year of the Council of Trent, 1560, was also suggested. The 19th century saw a lot of speculation about the imminent return. The Adventist church was forged in the experience of waiting on a particular day for the return. The waiters were disappointed, but a new church was born.

Still others seemed to have lost heart about humanity. They could see no sign of God's work and reign either in the church or in the world. Humanity appeared so helpless and hopeless that even God could do nothing with them. If there is to be a kingdom of God, God must reverse, destroy, counteract all that hinders its coming and establish the kingdom independent of human life and response, or lack of it. Not only the feast of the kingdom is provided by the king--the guests will

not even have to walk. All is foreordained, dispensation will follow dispensation. resurrection.

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### II. What Does the Strange Talk Mean?

When I was asked to write on this subject, the first book I started to read was written by three seminary professors, each of whom holds strong views on the Rapture. One position "represented posttribulationism expressed through covenant premillennialism." Someone else "defended premillennialism over against postmillennialism rather than arguing for the posttribulation Rapture as opposed to the pretribulation position." I did not write this. I am quoting from the first essay of that book.

When we start to approach the brand of eschatology so widely purveyed in current religious media and books, the first obstacle is the language itself. What Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggart, Pat Robertson and others are teaching cannot be understood without the underlying ideas. And to understand the ideas, one needs to learn the vocabulary. Later we will turn to the teaching but first to some definitions. If you find you have no patience at all with these terms, go to the next section and later you may want to return.

**Apocalypticism** (from the Greek word meaning revelation, or unveiling) -- A belief that God will intervene, on behalf of the faithful, in history. The future is not seen as the outcome of the present but will require a complete reversal due to divine intervention, which will take place through cataclysmic events. Parts of Daniel and the book of Revelation are apocalyptic writings. Apocalyptic is characterized by bizarre images, and violence which is needed to overcome evil.

**Dispensationalism** -- A system of belief focusing on successive dispensations. **Dispensations** -- Prescribed time periods in history that are certain to occur.

**Dispensationalists** -- People who subscribe to dispensationalism. An attitude of certainty about dispensations and events that will follow is based on the teachings of John Nelson Darby of Dublin, who visited Canada and the U.S. in the late 19th century. Darby became a mentor of C.I. Scofield, chief proponent of dispensationalism in this country. **Chiliasm** or **Millennialism** (from the Greek *chilias*, or the Latin *millennia*, both meaning one thousand) -- All millennialist

theories are concerned with a thousand-year literal, this-worldly reign of Christ referred to in Revelation 20. Millennialism speaks of what will happen here on earth on this side of death and eternity. The Council of Ephesus (431) condemned belief in a literal, future millennium, but the idea has cropped up time and time again, and has been very much on the scene in Britain and the U.S. since the middle of the last century. Diverse views of the timing of the millennium are held, as shown by the not very helpful terms pre- and post-millennialism. These refer to when the kingdom of God will arrive -- are we living before (pre) the kingdom, or has it come (post) already? Pre-millennialism holds that the Second Coming of Christ will be followed by Christ's thousand-year reign on earth before the fulfillment of God's redemptive purpose in the new heaven and new earth. **Dispensational pre-millennialism** asserts that the "millennial kingdom will be ushered in by a divine, supernatural and catastrophic manifestation from heaven at the Second Coming of Christ...when the conditions of life have reached the depth of great tribulation" (from Herman A. Hoyt, an article in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, edited by Robert G. Clouse, p. 63. Downer's Grove, IL: Inter Varsity, 1977). **Post-millennialism** believes that the kingdom of God is spread now through the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit. This view expects the world to be Christianized, leading to a long period of righteousness and peace, referred to as the millennium, at the end of which Christ will return. **Amillennialism** considers the millennium in Revelation 20 not only future but also present. This theory rejects the idea of a literal thousand-year earthly reign after Christ's return. It reads the book of Revelation in the context of the first century and as responding to problems the church faced at that point.

**Rapture** -- A theory held by pre-millennialists (whether dispensationalist or not) which posits a two-stage coming of Christ. The first is a mysterious arrival on clouds, without touching the earth, taking the true church -- i.e., true believers -- with him (rapture literally means being carried away). Theories about when the Rapture is to take place divide believers in the Rapture: as pre-, mid-, or post-tribulationists. **Tribulation**, or the Great Tribulation, a time of suffering which the whole world -- or mostly Israel -- will undergo, is a seven-year period during which the church may -- or may not -- be present on earth. **Pre-tribulation Rapture** holds that the Rapture will take place immediately prior to the beginning of the Tribulation, i.e., seven years before Christ's Second Coming. **Mid-tribulation Rapture** posits the Rapture three and a half years after the start of Tribulation, therefore three and a half years prior to Christ's Second Coming.

**Post-tribulation Rapture** believes the Rapture and Second Coming is a single event, one that will occur after the Tribulation.

Someone described the boxed-in system of dispensationalism as a structuralist's dream. As I survey these definitions of exactitudes and certitudes, there is more than structuralism here. There is a great fear of freedom and looseness. Small rooms, even prisons are less frightening to some people than windswept, open places. But God has put us into wide open spaces so that the Spirit can blow, and blow away the chaff.

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### III. What Is the "New Teaching"?

We referred to the fifth-century Council of Ephesus, which condemned belief in a future, historical millennium. Clearly the idea is very old. But with a lot of added features, it has become popular in the U.S. only very recently. We speak about the New Right in religion, as well as in politics, only since the late '70s. The preachers of these "new" teachings are the leaders of the new religious right. We will start our survey with a more moderate and serious view.

**The Pre-millennialist picture.** As we defined this teaching it holds that the Second Coming of Christ will be followed by a thousand years of Christ's earthly reign. George Eldon Ladd of Fuller Seminary, an exponent of this view, writes, "...the New Testament for the most part does not foresee a millennial kingdom"; and again, "The New Testament nowhere expounds the theology of the millennium, that is, its purpose in God's redemptive plan" (in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, *op. cit.* p. 39). Having made this careful statement, Ladd outlines the whole program to the end.

Before you read any further, I urge you to read Revelation 19:11—20:15 and take notes. This is important so that you yourself can judge and are not left between Professor Ladd's and my perceptions. For your independent view read the passage carefully: what happens, to whom, who does what? What are you reading about? What does it all mean? Try to visualize what you read. Then come back to this text and find out if your notes agree with what follows.

The Second Coming, says Ladd, brings Christ as conqueror who now destroys his enemies: first the Antichrist and all his supporters, then the one behind the Antichrist -- the dragon, or Satan, who is bound and imprisoned for a thousand years. The "first resurrection" of the saints takes place, they share Christ's millennial reign. At the close of this period Satan is released and finds supporters among the unregenerated who are prepared to stand against God. A final, eschatological war ends with the devil being cast into the lake of fire. The second resurrection -- of those not raised before the millennium --takes place, and they stand before God's judgment

throne.

Finally death itself is vanquished; like the devil and the wicked, it is thrown into the lake of fire. To most of us this, as a prophecy about the end of time, is all new. How is it that some Christians know this much about the "program" of the end times while the rest of us do not? They are reading the book of Revelation, from chapter 19, verse 11, to the end of chapter 20, a sequence of apocalyptic visions, as if they were prophecies. And inevitably they interpret those chapters. If you read Revelation 19:11—20:15, did you find all of the above? I did not, and needed the interpretation of millennialists to make "sense" of some of the events. Millennialists like Ladd are restrained interpreters because they hold that apocalyptic literature is about the end time -- and as we noted, they read apocalyptic as if it were prophetic fore-telling. But they do not turn other passages into end-time predictions.

**Dispensational approach.** The restraint noted above is singularly lacking in this school of thought. John Nelson Darby, a founder of the Plymouth Brethren, and C.I. Scofield following him, developed a scheme of dispensations. They taught that God has two distinct plans for two distinct communities. God has an earthly plan for Israel and a heavenly plan for "born-again" Christians. The rest of humanity has the possibility of joining one or the other. This view was popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible, first published in 1909.

In the 1917 edition, Scofield writes in the introduction: "...the dispensations are distinguished, exhibiting a majestic, progressive order of divine dealings of God with humanity, the increasing purpose which runs through and links together the ages from the beginning of the life of man to the end of eternity."

Darby and Scofield claimed to have discovered a doctrine of ages or dispensations in the Bible. The past is seen as a line of distinct, distinguishable periods; the present and the future are also part of the scheme of dispensations. They have discovered seven distinct dispensations:

1. Dispensation of innocence -- which ends with Genesis 3.
2. Dispensation of conscience -- ends with the flood.
3. Dispensation of human government -- ends with tower of Babel.
4. Dispensation of promise -- ends with Abraham's descendants going to Egypt and slavery.
5. Dispensation of law -- ends with the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.
6. Dispensation of grace -- ends with Second Coming of Christ.

## 7. Dispensation of the kingdom that will bring .history to an end.

The endings of the first five ages indicate that humanity failed completely and God thought up another dispensation and gave another opportunity in which humanity failed once again. Scofield warned of ruin, disaster, catastrophe to the end. There is no possibility of peace on earth until the millennium. Only true Christians need not fear because they will be with Christ. These and a number of other characteristics present in Scofield's dispensationalism became stronger and more obvious among his followers.

**Dispensational interpretation of Scripture.** Any passage from the prophets or apocalyptic writings can be used by dispensationalists as if it were speaking about the millennial reign of Christ. There is no justification for this, least of all by people who claim to interpret the Bible literally. The original meaning of the text -- that is, the intention of the writer in the historical, cultural context of the writing -- is disregarded by dispensationalists.

It is true that Jesus and the early Christian community reinterpret some texts, in the light of the Christ event and only in that light, not with reference to something yet to come. Matthew 2:15 reinterprets Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt have I called my Son." Philip reinterprets Isaiah 53 to the Ethiopian eunuch as speaking of Christ (Acts 7:30-35). But no other figure or event save Christ -- his cross and resurrection -- is ground for reinterpretation.

One example may show how differently biblical texts can be handled. We will look at Daniel 7:7-8, as commented on by John Calvin and C.I. Scofield. The verse speaks of the fourth beast, a dreadful creature with ten horns and "among them another little horn." When interpreters get to the little horn, says Calvin, they quickly point to the Pope or the Turks, that is, whoever opposes or threatens the faithful in their own day. But Calvin rejects this, because "they think the whole course of Christ's kingdom is here described," but instead God is showing to the prophet "what should happen up to the first advent of Christ." The convulsions of the age before Christ were too many, says Calvin. Dominion in the Near East went to the Persians, then the Macedonians -- "afterwards those robbers who made war under Alexander suddenly became kings" -- and strife and hostility were experienced. Then the Roman Empire took over. "Thus this vision was presented...that all the children of God might understand what severe trials awaited them before the advent of Christ." Daniel "does not embrace...the whole kingdom of Christ" (*Commentary on Daniel* 7:8). As here, so Calvin reads the entire book of Daniel as addressed to contemporaries at the time of writing with understandable historical and social references, therefore relevant for those who first hear or read it. It is speaking about the time before the first coming of Christ and needs to be interpreted in its historical context

According to Scofield the vision speaks of the end of Gentile world-dominion. The "little horn" is identified with "prince that shall come" (Dan. 9:26,27), the "king" (Dan. 11:36-45), "the abomination" (Dan. 12:11 and Matt. 24:15), the "man of sin" (II Thess. 2:4-8) and the "Beast" (Rev.13:4-10). What a horn!

Scotfield's end of the Gentile world-power is still in the future. "The 10 kingdoms, covering the regions formerly ruled by Rome, will constitute, therefore, the form in which the fourth or Roman empire will exist when the whole fabric of Gentile world-domination is smitten by the 'stone cut out without hands' = Christ." How did Scotfield know this? What reason can one find to say this is prophecy about the end of this world? None, according to the rest of us -- outside dispensationalism. That Scotfield is really speaking of the end time he makes clear both by the phrase "Gentile world power" and by cross-referencing the Daniel 7 passage with a footnote to Revelation 16:14: "The time of the Gentiles is that long period beginning with the Babylonian captivity of Judah...to be brought to an end by the destruction of Gentile world-power,...i.e., the coming of the Lord in glory (Rev. 19:11,21). Until which time Jerusalem is politically subject to Gentile rule (Luke 21:24)." And again on Daniel 2: "Gentile world power is to end in a sudden, catastrophic judgment," that is, in Armageddon

Three questions are unavoidable:

— What did the book of Daniel say to all its readers throughout the centuries if all these chapters are about an already determined future far, faraway?

— How does one know which passage is addressed to Israel or the early church, as well as for our own learning, and which is about the "end"? (Note the connections made between Daniel -- Matthew -- II Thessalonians -- Revelation.)

— Whatever we do, war is inevitable until the end. Is that really God's message to us?

**Dispensational determination** is another strong characteristic. While the prophets address Israel and Judah with a choice ("Unless you turn") and Jesus comes with a call ("Repent and believe" -- that is, the kingdom is at hand; are you at hand for the kingdom?), in the dispensational pattern, choices made today make no difference to the final outcome. If Presbyterians have problems with predestination, they must stand agape before this utterly boxed-in future. We will see details of this shortly

This closed-in future has two consequences. It greatly dilutes human responsibility by its what will be, will be scenario. Humanity is so hopelessly helpless that God will accomplish everything in spite of us. At the same time the tone of dispensationalism allows an insidious individualism to develop. "I am saved and safe," while the whole world, including loved ones, may perish. In a predetermined future, dispensational millennialists know they are on the right side and need not fear.

## What Shall We Believe? by Aurelia T. Fule

Aurelia Takacs Fule is a former staff member of the Program Agency of the United Presbyterian Church and later Associate for Faith and Order in the Theology and Worship Ministry Unity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She is retired and living in Santa Fe, N.M. What Shall We Believe? was copyrighted by Aurelia T. Fule in 1987 and is used by permission. This text was prepared for Religion Online by John C. Purdy.

### IV. Time Is Running Out

Small, isolated groups that have predicted and awaited the Second Coming on some chosen date have urgently prepared for it. But a sense of urgency in widespread preaching and writing is a new note. And the idea that we are coming to the close of history being held by people in high places is very new indeed.

Many of us recall James Watt, Secretary of the Interior, speaking before a House Committee, defending his policy of leasing wilderness areas with resultant damage to forests and rivers. Mr. Watt was not troubled by such damage. "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns."

The Secretary of Defense, Mr. Weinberger, noted, "I have read the book of Revelation and, yes, I believe the world is going to end -- by an act of God, I hope -- but everyday I think that time is running out" (*New York Times*, Aug. 23, 1982). President Reagan in a telephone conversation with Thomas Dine, Executive Director of the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee, on October 18, 1983, mused about Armageddon, the final battle on earth: "...and I find myself wondering if -- if we're the generation that's going to see that come about" (quoted in AG. Mojtabai, *Blessed Assurance*, p. 152).

Dangerous thoughts in dangerously high places.

What makes people think we may be coming to the end? Probably the danger of a possible nuclear holocaust, created especially by the powerful nations that produce nuclear arsenals, combines with the interpretation of this situation by the preachers in our midst.

**The signs** are spelled out by these interpreters. TV millennialists assure us that we know the end is coming "when we see these things coming to pass." To the disciples' question, "What shall be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" (Matt. 24:3), Scofield tells us the

answer is in verses 4-33. Then he lists the signs in verses 4-14 which "give the character of the age -- wars, international conflicts, famines, pestilences, false Christs all that has characterized the age gathers into awful intensity at the end...." Commenting on Revelation 20, Scofield enumerates seven signs, some of them specific, that precede the return of Christ in glory and the beginning of the day of the Lord:

1. The sending of Elijah (Mal. 4:5, Rev. 11:3-6)'
2. Cosmical (sic) disturbances (Joel 2:1-2, Matt. 24:29, Acts 2:19-20, Rev.6:12-17);
3. The insensibility of the professing church (I Thess. 5:1-3);
4. The apostasy of the professing church (II Thess. 2:3);
5. The rapture of the true church (I Thess. 4:17);
6. The manifestation of the "man of sin," the Beast (II Thess. 2:1-8);
7. The apocalyptic judgments (Rev. 11-18).

Signs one, five and seven could not be matters of opinion, it seems to me, but something observable by many or all people.

But interpretations -- including the signs -- have changed a great deal since Scofield published his Reference Study Bible. He had set in motion a catch- as-catch-can method of handling Scripture, and with individual creativity a flourishing field of preaching the signs has risen. Let us look at two other sets of signs. On the left I list those advocated by Gordon Lindsay in *The Second coming of Christ* (Dallas, TX: Christ for the Nations. Inc.. 1980), on the right those of Hal Lindsey in *The World's Final Hour* (Grand Rapids,

MI: Daybreak Books, Zondervan, 1970). Each author lists seven signs in his book, though Hal Lindsey comes up with 21 in *There's a New World Coming*.

Gordon Lindsay's list:      Hal Lindsey's list:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. The sign of preaching the<br>gospel throughout the world<br>(Matt. 24:14). | 1. "The most important": the<br>Jews become a nation again<br>(Ezek. 36: 16-24). |
|---|--|

2. "The sign of the Jew," meaning a new homeland (Luke 21:24).  
2. Jews must possess Jerusalem (Zech. 12—14) "before the Messiah can come back."
3. "The sign of the Eleventh Hour," i.e., World War I ended at 11 a.m. on Nov. 11 (1918) 11 months after Allenby entered Jerusalem.  
3. "The Jew is to rebuild the temple . . . in old Jerusalem. He has to" (II Thess. 2, Matt. 24: 15-16).
4. "The sign of atomic destruction" (Man. 24:21-22). We have power to utterly destroy the human race.  
4. Enemy from the north attacks Israel (Ezek. 38:2,3,15-16).
5. Men seeking to reach to the stars (Isa. 14:12-14); "Russia started a race for the moon." chariots and horsemen and with many ships" (this means — adds Lindsey — a great mechanized army with ships).  
5. Confederacy of Arabs against Israel (Dan. 11:40-45), "with chariots and horsemen and with many ships" (this means — adds Lindsey — a great mechanized army with ships).
6. Gifts of the spirit outpoured (Joel 2:29, Acts 2:17-21, Dan. 6. Gifts of the spirit outpoured (Joel 2:29, Acts 2:17-21, Dan. 6. Great confederacy of Arabs enters (Rev. 16:12-14); China

11:32, Luke 21:28). will send 200 million soldiers!

7. "The sign of Communism," 7. Ancient Rome will be revived

the Beast (Rev. 13:1-2), the (Dan. 7:15-25). The European

beast of scarlet (Rev. 17:3), Economic Community is cast

the dragon (Rev. 12:9,13:2,7). in this role -- a dictator and a

false prophet arise, and all is

prepared for the Tribulation.

Both differ from Scofield. If one is right, the others must be wrong. But, we need to ask, what is the sense of all this? Even if Scofield or Lindsay or Lindsey is right, what can I do about it, what difference would any of the lists make? The locked-in signs make one feel that nothing really matters, nothing would make any difference.

The modern authors have made one significant change: point 2 on the left, and points I, 2 and 3 on the right are all contrary to Scofield's "time of the Gentiles." So in our day it has become a sign -- necessary before Christ could return -- that the Jewish homeland, Jewish Jerusalem and Jewish Temple be accomplished. One wonders how it is that until there was a state of Israel no "Bible student" knew that its establishment was so eschatologically essential.

**Armageddon** as yet has only been mentioned in passing, but war has been alluded to. The hill of Megiddo, or Armageddon, and the surrounding plain of Jezreel, was the scene of decisive battles in the history of Israel (II Kings 9:27, II Chron. 35:22). The word Armageddon is used only once in Scriptures (Rev. 16:16), but imaginations run wild lately with battle plans. Ezekiel 38 and Daniel 11:40-45 are interpreted with abandon. Various portions in Revelation are also used to prove the point. You may be interested to read the six verses in Daniel 11:40-45. Hal Lindsey sums up this passage in *There's a New World Coming* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1984). "According to the Hebrew prophet, Daniel, the Russians will sweep down to join the Arabs in an attack on Israel and will then continue right through Israel to Egypt and take it over....They come into the conflict...as allies of the Arabs but end up double-crossing them" (p. 210). I challenge you to find this in Daniel. The question is not whether Lindsey is right or wrong, but whether this is what Old Testament prophecy is. Is this the business God is engaged in?

Armageddon is not always named, but when war is mentioned with reference to Ezekiel 38 or Daniel, it is always Armageddon talk. Three days after the Israeli army began to invade

Lebanon, Pat Robertson spoke on his CBN program on June 9, 1982: "I guarantee you by the fall of 1982, that there is going to be judgment on the world, and the ultimate judgment is going to come on the Soviet Union. They are going to be the ones to make military adventures...by the fall undoubtedly something like this (he free-quoted parts of Ezekiel 38) will happen which will fulfill Ezekiel."

"Something like this" did not happen in the fall of 1982. No one reminded Mr. Robertson that he had guaranteed something. By then he was engaged in other predictions.

Jerry Falwell, preaching on Revelation 16:16 (December 2, 1984), said: "There will be one last skirmish and then God will dispose of this cosmos will destroy this -- the heavens and the earth." During the "holocaust of Armageddo...the Antichrist will move into the Middle East and place a statue of himself in the Jewish temple...and demand that the whole world worship him as Go....Millions of devout Jews will be slaughtered (Zech.

13:8)...but a remnant will escape (Zech. 13:9)...God will keep them because the Jews are the Chosen People of God." But millions are to be slaughtered? The whole sermon went on with the dreadful details of the war. The warriors "will doubtless be approaching 400 million in number." Why doubtless? Why so many?

On an earlier tape, "Dr. Jerry Falwell Teaches Bible Prophecy" (Old Time Gospel Hour, 1979), one hears:...Armageddon is a reality, a horrible reality. But thank God, it's the end of the days" of the Gentiles, for it then sets the stage for the introduction of the king, the Lord Jesus...."

Falwell gets all this not from the Scriptures, but largely from his own interpretation of events -- in the framework of his belief. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 1981, he said: "We believe that Russia, because of her need of oil -- and she's running out now -- is going to move in on the Middle East, and particularly Israel .... It is at that time when all hell will break out...when I believe there will be some nuclear holocaust on this earth, because it says that blood shall flow in the streets up to the bridle of the horses...." Some nuclear holocaust! Can he believe this and still smile?

Jimmy Swaggart, Falwell's closest competitor, rejoices in the coming extermination. In a sermon, broadcast September 22, 1985, he shares his gladness: "I believe Armageddon is coming, Armageddon is coming. It is going to be fought in the valley of Megiddo. It is coming. They can sign all the peace treaties they want. They won't do any good... It is going to get worse...My Lord! I am happy....I don't care who it (Armageddon) bothers. I don't care who it troubles . It thrills my soul."

While a presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan said to Jim Bakker of the P.T.L. network: "We may be the generation that sees Armageddon." His interest in fulfillment of prophecies and in Armageddon is documented. That same summer William Safire reported Mr. Reagan's words

when addressing Jewish leaders: "Israelis the only stable democracy we can rely on as a spot where Armageddon could come." It is true that the ancient hill of Megiddo is in modern Israel, but what possible use could a stable democracy be during "some nuclear holocaust"? I wonder whether in Mr. Reagan's mind Armageddon is not just a place and a battle, but something for which Israel and the U.S. can plan together? Do these people believe what they are saying? How can they go on cheerfully after disposing of millions of people, nay, most of humanity? The answer is, of course, that they have found a way out.

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### V. The Rapture

The Rapture is "the next great event on the horizon of time (perhaps the greatest in all of history)," says Jimmy Swaggart. The word is not found in the Scriptures. The whole expectation is built on a particular reading of I Thessalonians 4:13-18. In verse 17 believers alive at the time of Christ's coming "shall be caught up together with them," that is, with the dead who are raised "in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." All rapturists believe this is a kind of private visit of Christ, and not the Second Coming. If one argues that Scripture knows about only one Second Coming at the close of the age and that I Thessalonians 4:17 does not mean what Rapture believers say it does, one is assured that this is not the only verse to teach the Rapture.

Tim La Haye refers to Titus 2:13, ". . . awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ." "Our blessed hope," he says, "is a reference to the Rapture of the church -- the cause for great rejoicing..." The second part of the sentence, "the appearing 'is the Second Coming (Tim La Haye, *The Beginning of the End*, Living Books, Tyndale House Publishers, 1984, p. 24). But how would anyone know this? It surely is not in the biblical text. One piece of advice to the reader who has come this far: relax, read what follows with some thought of what Hollywood could do with the material!

The Rapture, according to most of its proponents, has five elements indicated in I Thessalonians 4: 1)The return of Christ; 2) Resurrection of believers; 3) Rapture of living believers -- besides verse 17 a number of unlikely texts are referred to (I Cor. 15:51-52, Job 19:25, Isa. 26:19, Dan. 12:2, John 5:26-29); 4) Reunion with loved ones, with the Lord, and being taken to heaven (Job 14:1-3); 5) Reassurance, comfort, encouragement The debate among believers in the Rapture is about the time, when it will take place. In the definitions we noted that there are pre-, mid- and post- tribulationist positions; let us begin with the last one

**The post-tribulationist Rapture** is not on the horizon yet; a lot of things will take place first. Here is the sequence. Try to visualize it as you read.

Israel will sign a pact with the leader of the revived Roman Empire, i.e., the European Economic Community (Dan. 9:25-27), "the man of sin." This will signal the outbreak of the Great Tribulation, a period of horrifying events. Scofield refers to Revelation 7:14, which uses the word tribulation (and Rev. 11—18, Rev. 3:10, Jer. 30:7). Daniel, Matthew 24, I&II Thessalonians also come in for good measure. This is a time of the reign of the "beast out of the sea" (Rev. 13:1) and the work of the devil "in great wrath" (Rev. 12:12). During this period 144,000 persons will be kept safe (Rev. 7:4), though they will not be redeemed until the Second Coming. According to some, they are a "symbolic representation of the church," but others believe them to be Jews, as indeed the text suggests, 12,000 for each of the 12 tribes.

The hours of the tribulation will end with the Day of the Lord, the final destruction of all Gentile world-power. The true church now will experience the promise of Revelation 3:10: "I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world." What they are to be kept from is Armageddon, which may be very quick or -- with recently inflated imagination -- quite long. In Hal Lindsey's *There's a New World Coming*, in its updated edition, 12 pages are written on the different phases and battle plans of Armageddon, a rather long war.

Then comes the Rapture and Second Coming, one event for post-tribulationists. The raptured are taken up just for a moment and at once return to earth with the descent of Christ. At this point 144,000 will be saved, if they are Jews. Those who believe they represent the church have another scenario.

The Millennium starts at this point, when Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years. Two sets of people are highlighted to enter the millennial kingdom: the 144,000, probably Jews, and the true church "raptured" for a moment and returned with Christ. The difference that the Rapture seems to have made is that these people return with the Lord in a moment with changed, resurrection bodies. The 144,000, on the other hand, are still in their natural bodies, hence they will be the parents of the millennial population. Are you reminded of medieval theologians arguing about how many angels can dance on the tip of a pin?

But this is not yet the end, only a thousand years. What follows is not very different from the view we will look at next. So we will rejoin this narrative at that point. The scenario we followed is largely the one outlined by Charles C. Ryrie, considered an expert in this field (*What You Should Know About the Rapture*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1981). Pat Robertson seems to hold this position.

The Tribulation is one of the dividing lines among rapturists. Post-tribulationists, as we saw, believe the Rapture will take place at the end of the seven-year Tribulation, mid-tribulationists that it will be in the middle and pre-tribulationists that rescue is sure at the start.

The pre-tribulationist stand is far more popular, for obvious reasons. Jerry Falwell and Jimmy Swaggart are pre-tribulationist pre-millennialists. The program we will look at is Jimmy

Swaggart's *The Future of Planet Earth* (Baton Rouge: Jimmy Swaggart Ministries, 1984).

Pre-tribulationists believe that the next great event is the Rapture. Swaggart's narrative speaks of this as the "first resurrection," "when every child of God who has ever lived -- all the way from Adam ..". will be changed in the "twinkling of an eye." This is generous and unusual. Others speak of living believers only, perhaps because the Tribulation does not bother the dead. But in Swaggart's view: "The soul and the spirit of every Christian who has ever lived will then be reunited with their deceased bodies," the latter being changed, of course." What better way to get the attention of mankind than to instantly withdraw millions of people from the face of the earth?" Indeed, not to mention the resurrection of the dead. So everyone will know that the last days are very near. The major benefit of this position is that one can calmly contemplate the horrors, Armageddon, nuclear war and the rest, because the person propagating these views believes he (I have not found a single woman preacher or writer in this group) will not need to endure any of it -- only others will.

The Great Tribulation follows for seven years (Matt. 24:21). During its first half the Antichrist comes on the scene. The second half will be still worse, "so horrifying that the minds of men will scarcely comprehend." The reasons are: to punish the world for its sin, and to bring Israel, "the primary subject of the Tribulation," to Christ. After accepting a false Messiah who will desecrate the holy Temple -- by then rebuilt in Jerusalem -- many of the Jews will flee Jerusalem and go to Petra. They "would be completely annihilated" but for "the direct intervention of God." This poor remnant will return to Jerusalem just at the wrong time.

Armageddon is to be fought now, and the remnant "will cry as they never have before for the Messiah to return."

The Second Coming of Christ (Rev. 19:11-16) with his saints then takes place -- with Christ coming on the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:4). "The Jews will then accept the Lord Jesus Christ (Zech. 12:7-10)." If you are checking references you will note that the last one is very uncertain.

At this point we join the post-tribulation timetable and consider predictions for both streams, still following Swaggart's outline.

The Millennium begins (Rev. 20:1-3). "It is the literal and tangible kingdom of Jesus Christ reigning on earth from the city of Jerusalem (Zech. 14:16)." Satan will be in the bottomless pit; swords will be made into plowshares; war, poverty, pain, sickness will be no more. The reign of Christ will be "infinite prosperity, peace, glory, and power." Swaggart says that during this time "death will no longer be the fearful pall culminating the life of every man." In all my reading I could not pin down anyone more than that. Will people die in the thousand-year reign? There will be birth, that is clear, but will they all stay alive, or only the "fear of death" be overcome? Sorry, I cannot tell.

Then Satan is loosed for a season (Rev. 20:3, 7-9) at the end of the thousand years. We discover that the perfect kingdom was not all perfect. Those who "were forced to obey the laws, but in their hearts did not desire righteousness" will join Satan who "must be loosed a little season" (Rev.20:3). Satan starts a new battle against Christ in Jerusalem. Note verses 7-9 in Revelation 20. Gog and Magog are with Satan in this last battle; later we will meet them elsewhere. The battle ends with God's intervention, and Satan ends as well (Rev. 20:10).

The last judgment, or the Great White Throne Judgment, follows in everybody's script (Rev. 20:11-14). This takes place, says Swaggart, in heaven. Those who lived without God, the "unsaved," will be judged according to the lives they lived. No one will be pardoned, or receive a lesser penalty -- "all will be thrown into the lake of fire," says Swaggart, not Revelation. Even he cannot avoid the question: if everyone receives the same punishment, why hold a judgment? The "immaculate judgment of God" requires this, he says, so that no one could accuse God of being unfair.

Some people, probably most people, believe that one day we will all have to give account for our life. Utterly wrong, says Swaggart. "No Christian will be judged, as our (Christians') sins have already been blotted out by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Only the unsaved will be at the Great White Throne Judgment ... not one single child of God will be there." That's great. No need to fear atomic war, ecological disaster, or even God. Just stay close to the saints around Swaggart, or Falwell, or others who share the same views. In the medieval church, people purchased indulgences to shorten their stay in purgatory. Is this not a new and more malignant form of indulgence? Some popes might have thought they had influence over punishment in purgatory, but none would have claimed to change God's judgment. Yet these pre-millennialists claim a full and perfect guarantee for this life and all eternity, based not on the love of God alone, but on the damnation of many. The New Heaven and the New Earth (Rev. 21:1-5) will follow the last judgment. There is considerable difference on this point. Hal Lindsey and others point to II Peter 3:7,10, "... heavens will pass away ... the elements will be disintegrated with fire, and the earth ... will be burned up." Lindsey titles this section "The Quadrillion Megaton Explosion." During the Millennium the Holy City, New Jerusalem, will be suspended above the earth, muses Lindsey, and temporarily withdrawn during the destruction of the earth "In any case, the New J [for Jerusalem] will be the center of the universe" (*There's a New World Coming*, p. 272). Yes and no, says Swaggart.

Though we read of "a new heaven and a new earth," for Swaggart this does not mean the present earth will be done away with. But dramatic changes are indicated. Here it is valuable to stop and see how Swaggart handles Scripture. "The Greek word is *parerchomai*. This means to pass from one condition to another." Swaggart refers to Revelation 20:1, "for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away." In that text a different form of *parerchomai* is used, but in either case the question is: what does it mean? First we look at as broad a usage as possible. In various forms the term is used 21 times in the New Testament. Fifteen of these indicate finality, not change; most of the other six indicate "going or passing by," e.g., Acts 16:8. Many of the 15

uses are in couplets that make the meaning obvious. In italics are the words that are identical in Greek. "Till heaven and earth *pass away*, not an iota, not a dot, will *pass* from the law" (Matt. 5:18)." ... This generation will not *pass away* till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will *pass away*, but my words will not *pass away*" (Matt. 24:34-35; also Mark 13:30-31; Luke 21:32-33). You cannot replace "pass away" with "change," or passing "from one condition to another." II Corinthians 5:17, James 1:10, and II Peter 3:10 are similar. If Revelation is to be read as predicting the future -- as all dispensationalists say it is to be read -- then why do they not do it? In Revelation 21:5 God says: "Behold, I make all things new." Swaggart just does not want the earth let go. I wonder why.

The new earth will be different, without oceans, but also without rebellion and evil. At last all will be well. And then, "to stun men's minds," says Swaggart, ever conscious of effect, the New Jerusalem will come down "transferring God the Father's throne" to earth. The new city will be 1,500 miles square. "God will change His headquarters from heaven to New Jerusalem on earth and will reign in total righteousness and love, among men..."

Swaggart's God is not small, but tiny. In an age when people learn of an infinite or expanding universe, these preachers depict a tribal god on a heaven-made throne in an immensely big city!

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### VI. What Does the Reformed Tradition Say?

After I read a number of descriptions of the Tribulation, the Rapture and the rest, I had the uneasy feeling that Hollywood had taken over the religious scene. What movies these would make -- for those who like scary special effects on the screen! This graphic and dramatic detail is absent in the teaching of all the historic churches -- Roman Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant. How do we account for this difference of style as well as content? A basic reason is that we read the Scriptures differently.

**A. Scriptures and divine intervention.** The work of Christ affected humanity; Christ opened wide the gates of heaven so that now all kinds of people may enter in.

When you read the above sentence, I assume you understand the phrase "opened wide the gates of heaven." From the beginning of Paul's mission the church gratefully recognized that God who worked especially with the people of Israel, the family circle of the Messiah, included the rest of humanity in the divine plan. So the non-Jew from Jerusalem to Rome, the known world of the day, also could hear the gospel. The gates of heaven were opened wide.

If you now begin to ask: are there gates on heaven? how many? what are they made of? which ones are open and when? -- you miss the whole point. I would have to say: Even if there is no gate at all Christ still opened wide the gates. The truth in the above sentence does not depend on whether the parts of it are actually true. Or think of a parable Jesus told, the good Samaritan or the prodigal son . Did it happen just this way? Even if it never happened, the truth of the parable remains.

This principle clearly is not applicable to historical material. If there never was a King David, if Jesus was not born, then we cannot find a truth remaining, because the story is not based on actual events. That is why it is essential to know what kind of literary material we are interpreting. If it is historical narrative, we ask questions about time and correct descriptions. When it is poetry, metaphor, allegory, parable, proverb, apocalyptic vision, then we search for

the meaning, the truth for which the words are vehicles.

One of the basic disagreements between us and the millennialists is over the matter of biblical interpretation, especially the interpretation of Daniel, the book of Revelation and prophecies in the Old Testament. The millennialists read these as history. The dispensationalists among them insist on the "literal" interpretation of Revelation as well as of the rest of the Bible. This position is not reasonable. In the 1981 Bible Study of United Presbyterian Women and Women of the Church, "Called by Grace to a Life of Love,"

William Chalker speaks wisely about the fallacy of literal meaning:

The difficulty with this position is the simple fact that words have no "literal" meanings. (Consider the word rose. Does it mean a flower? A color? Is it someone's name? Is it the past tense of the verb rise? Only the context tells us. Such words as prayer, obedience, sacrifice, praise and salvation have one meaning in the context of idolatry and another in the context of Israel's faith.) Those who interpret passages "literally" are, in fact, supplying contexts themselves to give the passages their meaning. But if we are faithful stewards who want to hear God's Word and not our own in Scripture ... we will diligently and prayerfully seek, with all our minds, for the meaning intended by the biblical texts .... (CONCERN, Spring 1981, pp. 29-30).

This is the perspective of the Reformed tradition.

The problem becomes even more complex when we turn to a special genre of literature, apocalyptic writings. The Reformer John Calvin, who wrote commentaries on almost every book in the Bible, did not write one on Revelation.

Daniel is the only apocalyptic writing in the Old Testament, and Revelation the only one in the New Testament. A number of others were written: the three books of Enoch, the Second Book of Esdras, the Ascension of Isaiah, and later the Apocalypse of Peter. Daniel, which influenced them all, was itself influenced by Zoroastrian teaching on the Last Judgment, the battle between good and evil in which humans and angels participate, the punishment of evildoers by fire, elements not present elsewhere in Old Testament tradition. The material in the Book of Daniel was put into a collection, according to Jewish and Christian scholars, in the mid-second century B.C. The book was addressed to the Jews at a time when temple worship and even the existence of Jewish faith was threatened. The time was the Maccabean revolt (165 B.C.) of a group of Jews against Antiochus Epiphanes IV, who dedicated to Zeus Olympus the second (rebuilt) temple in Jerusalem. The book, especially chapters 7-12, gives hope to the rebels. However dark it is now, God is aiding them, they are nearing the end of the fight and approaching a golden age.

The kind of prediction about the future in Daniel differs from prophetic fore-telling. Here the

future is not the result of past and present actions, of faith or unbelief, repentance or sin, but a complete reversal of what would be expected. The reversal is brought about by the imminent, supernatural intervention of God.

This apocalyptic world view influenced Jewish culture. Jesus' hearers were familiar with it, and the early church retained the view; see I Thessalonians 4, and the "little apocalypse" in Mark 13, Matthew 24, and Luke 21. But the major New Testament representative of this view is Revelation.

To the persecuted Christian believers the Revelation to John brought hope, as the Book of Daniel did two centuries earlier. Christ appears as an omnipotent being, executing God's judgment, in himself the supernatural intervention of God in history. He reverses history to the relief of the suffering believers. The essence of apocalyptic is the affirmation that God who is in control will one day deal with evil radically; God will go to the roots and pluck it out. However much destruction and punishment this might entail, God will do it. And you who have been faithful will stand with God in a world of justice and peace. That is what apocalyptic is all about: God's sovereignty in spite of the present power of evil and God's final vindication of the faithful and just. The clearest and best example of reading Revelation as it was read in the first century, as God's assurance to the suffering Christian community, is Allan Boesak's recent book *Comfort and Protest*.

In the first two centuries of the Christian era, the early church sustained the reassuring note of apocalyptic expectation about Christ's imminent return with the kingdom. But when persecutions became intermittent, and some areas were not affected by them at all, the needs of the community changed. Origen, one of the giants of Christian thought, helped the church in the third century to perceive the rule of Christ in the life of the believer, not in the external world. The conversion of Constantine in the fourth century altered the picture -- the state or the Emperor was no longer seen as the Antichrist.

Throughout the centuries individuals here and there revived millennial expectations, but no serious impact was made. During the Reformation, in spite of the suffering of very large numbers of Protestants and later Roman Catholics, neither the Reformers nor the Roman church turned to the hope of a future millennium. The only exceptions in the 16th century were among the radical reformers involved in the Peasant's Revolt (1524-25), and the militant Anabaptists of Muenster (1534)

.In the midst of persecution and martyrdom it might have been "helpful" to believe that God would intervene and miraculously rescue God's own. But no such hope was raised. The Christian hope is not in an interventionist God. There were five young Frenchmen who studied at the (Protestant) School of Theology in Lausanne. While traveling in France, where Protestantism was illegal, in April 1552, they were arrested and later condemned to death. The Swiss cantons protested and petitioned the French court, sending messages and representatives.

Calvin wrote to them throughout the year. His letters are testimony to the faith of the five students as well as his own. Hope is in the faithfulness of God, not in a happy outcome.

"If He has promised to strengthen with patience those who suffer chastisement for their sins, how much less will God be found wanting to ... those whom God employs on so worthy a mission as being witnesses to God's truth. You must therefore keep this sentence in mind, that the One who dwells in you is stronger than the world." (1 Calvin, to the five prisoners of Lyon, 7 March 1553, from *Letters of John Calvin*, selected from the Bonnet Edition. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Press, 1980, p. 144.) It is Calvin who writes in May that year: "My very dear Brothers: the king has peremptorily refused all the requests made by Messieurs of Berne...All earthly hope is gone; they will be executed: "...let enemies do their utmost, they never shall be able to bury out of sight that light which God has made to shine in you..." (*Ibid.*, p. 148, 150). And that light shone. According to contemporary records, the five were burnt at the stake together, saying to each other: "Courage, my brothers, courage." No intervention -- no Millennium, no Rapture -- promised or expected.

Calvin's understanding of the book of Revelation is reflected only in references to it in other writings, since he wrote no commentary on it. Checking out the references to Revelation in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I found that Calvin quoted Revelation far less than any other book of comparable size in the Bible. Reading each reference, it is clear that Calvin treated it as apocalyptic literature, written for the comfort of the suffering, persecuted church in the first century and that he found in it notes of comfort for every age. He found also general teaching in it, applicable to our daily life. On Revelation 19:10 and 22:8-9, where the seer's reaction to the angel is, "I fell down to worship," Calvin comments: "We are not to bow to anyone but God, not even angels." (I.xii.3). Divine glory belongs to God alone, he affirms (Ixiv. 10). No great millennial scenarios, just teaching to live by.

In the 17th and 18th centuries there were Reformed theologians in Britain and North America who spoke with more fervor about the coming kingdom, approaching a millennial expectation. But it was not treated as a doctrine, nor was it a major element in their teaching; they were not predicting the future and were not distorting the Scriptures. Only in the latter part of the 19th century, once again in Britain and in the U.S., was there a real revival of apocalyptic interest that was nurtured into almost a distinct religion.

About the last things, the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition teaches, together with the historic churches, only the four themes witnessed to in the New Testament:

- the return of Christ;
- the resurrection;
- judgment; and

— eternal life.

**B. The Millennium.** The Millennium, a centerpiece of the various scenarios, is an erroneous expectation. It is based on only two verses, and those are in Revelation (20:2,4). Calvin comments on it "...the chiliasts limited the reign of Christ to a thousand years. Now their fiction is too childish either to need or to be worth a refutation. And the Apocalypse, from which they undoubtedly drew a pretext for their error, does not support them. For the number 'one thousand' (Rev. 20:4) does not apply to the eternal blessedness of the church...On the contrary, all Scripture proclaims that there will be no end to the blessedness of the elect..." (*Institutes*, III.xxv.5).

Yet the Millennium is vital to the dispensationalist scheme. Once the decision is made

— that the two apocalyptic writings in the Bible predict the end time,

— that they are to be interpreted "literally," and

— that any prophecy anywhere in the Old Testament may refer to the end time,

then one cannot avoid the thousand-year reign of Christ. As we saw one cannot avoid even the loosing of Satan at the end of the thousand years, one of the strangest, most frightening and also contradictory notions. As we noted, the blessedness of the Millennium was not all that blessed for those who were "forced to obey" in Swaggart's description.

We need to be careful how we read Scriptures.

**C. The Rapture** is similarly missing; the word does not even occur in the New Testament. The passage to which rapturists point is I Thessalonians 4:17. It is helpful to read the whole passage, verses 13-18. The theme is the Second Coming of Christ, which Paul relates to the certainty of Christ's resurrection and ours. Paul's purpose here is not to expound a doctrine, though he does that too. He wants to allay the fear of those who expected, as he did, the early return of the Lord, yet in this time of waiting their loved ones had died. What will happen to those who will not be here when the Lord comes? So Paul assures them: "...we who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep...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" (vv. 15-17). This passage has been interpreted through the ages as speaking of the return of Christ, the resurrection and eternal life, three of the themes of Christian eschatology.

Rapture has not been heard of until quite recently. A young woman living in Port Glasgow,

Scotland, Margaret MacDonald (1815-1840), had a vision in which she saw a two-stage coming of Christ, first for the church, then with the church. She later wrote down her vision, but visions normally allow various interpretations, and this vision is far from clear. The influence of Margaret MacDonald on John N. Darby, who first taught the Rapture, has been traced. Some fiercely reject the connection, trusting Darby's claim that his idea came from the Bible. In either case, the doctrine is a latecomer which the rest of us do not find in the Scriptures.

**D. Tribulation**, another of the major themes, pictures the horrible seven years of suffering on earth, with the church present, or leaving in the middle of the horror, or absent entirely. That Tribulation is "the time of Jacob's trouble," i.e., primarily concerns the Jews and takes place mainly in Israel, or that it is worldwide, are variations on the theme. Is this concept biblical, and if so why has the church not always heard it?

Tribulationists refer to the ninth chapter of Daniel. The first two verses recall the prophecy of Jeremiah on the length of captivity -- 70 years. After a long and beautiful prayer in verses 3-19, Gabriel appears to give wisdom and understanding to Daniel. Then Gabriel speaks of "seventy weeks of years," not 70 years but seven times 70 or 490. By varied and complex interpretations tribulationists insist that the last seven-year period has not yet been fulfilled. When it starts, it will be the great tribulation spoken of in Matthew 24:15-28 and corresponding passages and in Revelation 7:14.

For us such contortions of both Scripture passages and historical contexts raise more questions than they answer. Why do proponents of these methods go to so much trouble? With a very tidy mind, if one can have a large overall picture, pieces can be found to fit in and fill the details. This is not a conscious misleading, one can be carried away with logical constructions. That is the kindest way I can look at the dispensationalist structure.

What do we say to all these themes? We see no biblical basis for a literal, earthly Millennium, or for a Rapture or for the Tribulation. We find that the central error of dispensationalism and all millennial speculations is that they fail to take seriously the work of Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit and the kingdom.

The Christian hope has reference to the future, but also to that which is now past -- Christ has already accomplished our salvation. The New Testament indicates that the believers were convinced that the hope of Israel has been fulfilled. In Christ, in his death and resurrection, God "has visited and redeemed" God's people. Christians speak not only of the future but affirm that God "has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of God's beloved One, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13,14). God's reign has been inaugurated.

The church in its diverse streams, with varying depth and zeal, has proclaimed throughout the ages, in the administration of the sacraments, that believers participate here and now in a reality

that is beyond the visible and experiential. To baptize is to seal the believer for the day of final redemption. To break the bread and to pour the wine is to share a foretaste of the Messianic banquet: God's then breaks into our now, time and timelessness is spanned. It may not be surprising that the sacraments are not mentioned in millennialist/dispensationalist circles. Yes, the church awaits the fulfillment, but it lives by God's grace and Spirit, as participant in God's work in the time between the ushering in of the kingdom of Christ in the incarnation and the revelation of its full glory. For that we all wait together.

The 118th General Assembly (1978) of the Presbyterian Church U.S. adopted an interpretive study, "Eschatology: The Doctrine of the Last Things," consisting of twelve theses and a position paper. The text is printed in the Minutes of that Assembly (pp. 208-231) and it is profitable reading.

The study, written in response to millennialist teaching, reaffirms and also publishes an earlier (1944) position of the Presbyterian Church U.S. on dispensationalism. So it is a helpful paper on the issues we are discussing. Since its writing we have been inundated with TV preachers' imaginative contributions -- hence the need to look at the matter once more.

## What Shall We Believe? by Aurelia T. Fule

Aurelia Takacs Fule is a former staff member of the Program Agency of the United Presbyterian Church and later Associate for Faith and Order in the Theology and Worship Ministry Unity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She is retired and living in Santa Fe, N.M. What Shall We Believe? was copyrighted by Aurelia T. Fule in 1987 and is used by permission. This text was prepared for Religion Online by John C. Purdy.

### **VII. What Do Our Creeds and Confessions Say?**

We in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are in the fortunate position of having not just one or two confessions, but a Book of Confessions. This is characteristic of Reformed churches. When we sense that God puts new challenges before us, together we rethink before God what we believe. I cannot recommend strongly enough that you take The Book of Confessions and read it through -- maybe not all at one sitting, but not too many either, because you lose the threads. And there are threads. Before we go into details, I want to share with you a thread that I noted as I read the Confessions for eschatological notes. There are not too many eschatological references but they are there. But what is there in greater abundance -- besides the constant subjects, the Trinity, the work of Christ and Scriptures, and the differing theological emphases of different ages -- are the references to our common life here and now. These include:

References to the church, for God calls us not only to faith but to a life of faith in community (3.16,18,25; 5.124-141; 6.140-145,169-172; 9.20-26,31-40,43-50).

References to the Sacraments, inclusion in the community and food for the journey of faith (3.21-23; 4.065-085; 5. 169-210; 6. 161-168; 7.272-287;

9.51-52).

References to good works which are done "to show gratitude to God, and for the profit of the neighbor" (5.117). (3.13,14; 5.115-123; 6.087-093).

References to civil authorities (3.24; 5.252-260; 6,119-122; and 8, the Barmen Declaration).

References to marriage and divorce (5.245-251; 6.131-132).

Our tradition is persuaded that our Creator is concerned not only with the parts, but with the

whole. "The kingdom has drawn near," Jesus' first proclamation, was followed by healing of bodies and minds; by freeing persons who felt bound; by challenging authorities, religious and secular, when they stepped beyond their limits (the cleansing of the temple; on paying tax). The Christian gospel is not addressed to a part of life, but to the whole of it Reformed Christians have understood this; it is what they saw in the prophets and in the ministry of Jesus. They involved the church and its members in the whole of life. We are not to retreat into a .religious life; rather, we are called to transform our common life. Church and state, the world of labor and of education, the family and the economy are to be touched by God's redeeming work. For God so loved the world, that God gave: Christ, the Spirit and the Christian community to participate in the work of transformation. That is the context in which Reformed confessions speak about the last things. The current edition of The Book of Confessions has an index, so one can find all the references. I will highlight only a few.

The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds mention the four themes -- resurrection, return of Christ, judgment and eternal life -- with clarity and economy.

The return of Christ is confirmed in the catechisms: The Heidelberg (4.046,052), the Shorter (7.028) and the Larger (7.166), the Westminster Confession (6.180-182). (Note that since 1983 Westminster is numbered differently than in previous editions.) And in the Confession of 1967 (9.32,52).

The resurrection is spoken of in the Scots Confession (3.10,11,25), in the Heidelberg Catechism (4.057), in the Second Helvetic Confession (5.075), the Shorter (7.038) and the Larger Catechisms (7.197).

The last judgment is pointed to in the Scots Confession (3.11), the Heidelberg Catechism (4.046,052), the Westminster Confession (6.180-182).

Eternal life is set forth in the Heidelberg Catechism (4.042,052,058,059,076) and in the Confession of 1967 (9.11,26).

The four elements of the last things are affirmed by Reformed Christians but we speak more of what God requires of us and equips us for now, than of the last things. When we look at the whole picture of God's will, what we see is very different from what the dispensationalists and millennialists teach. Because we see the kingdom both here and yet not fully here, our concerns are different. Listen to the Heidelberg Catechism:

What is the second petition [of the Lord's Prayer]?

A "Thy Kingdom come." That is: so govern us by the Word and Spirit that we may more and more submit ourselves unto thee. Uphold

and increase thy church. Destroy the works of the devil ... until

the full coming of thy kingdom in which thou shalt be all in all.(4.123)

How rooted we must be in both this world and eternity, how deeply we need to understand the power of the kingdom already here and the hope of its full presence, that is, the dynamics of the Christian life, is beautifully expressed in the Confession of 1967. This is the inclusive language text prepared by Cynthia A. Jarvis and Freda A. Gardner. Read it slowly to savor the description:

God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ embraces the whole of human life: social and cultural, economic and political, scientific and technological, individual and corporate. It includes the natural environment as exploited and despoiled by sin. It is the will of God that the purpose for human life shall be fulfilled under the rule of Christ and all evil be banished from creation. (9.53)

Biblical visions and images of the rule of Christ such as a heavenly city, the household of God, a new heaven and earth, a marriage feast, and an unending day culminate in the image of the kingdom. The kingdom represents the triumph of God over all that resists the will and disrupts the creation of God. Already God's reign is present as a ferment in the world, stirring hope in all people and preparing the world to receive its ultimate judgment and redemption. (9.54)

With an urgency born of this hope the church applies itself to present tasks and strives for a better world. It does not identify limited progress with the kingdom of God on earth, nor does it despair in the face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast hope the church looks beyond all partial achievement to the final triumph of God. (9.55)

"Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." [Quoting Ephesians 3:20-21.1(9.56)

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### VIII: Why Should the "New Teaching" Trouble Us?

The Christian community always takes notice, early or late, of erroneous teachings. We noted that in the former Presbyterian Church U.S. two General Assemblies (1944, 1978) attended to earlier manifestations of dispensationalism. All of a sudden we find ourselves in the midst of a constant barrage of promises and threats of a Rapture plus nuclear holocaust. This is dangerous and we must attend to it. People who hold the views we have examined call themselves evangelical fundamentalists. But we must make a clear distinction. What we find in the proponents of Rapture and Millennium is a fundamentalist temperament, a fundamentalist note of certainty, a fundamentalist claim of "literal" interpretation -- but also lots and lots of other elements. Fundamentalists may believe that they interpret the Scriptures "literally," but most of them are not in the prophecy business. They do not have millennial, rapture, tribulation expectations. They remain in the framework of eschatology shared by all historic churches and creeds. We must be sure not to attribute dispensational doctrines to all fundamentalists. I called the situation dangerous for two reasons: first, the significant spread of this view; secondly, the consequences of this view.

"Of the 4,000 evangelical-fundamentalists who annually attend the National Religious Broadcasters Convention an estimated 3,000 are dispensationalists ..." writes Grace Halsell (*Prophecy and Politics*, p.14). Halsell adds that 1,400 religious stations carry this voice and that of the 80,000 evangelical pastors who broadcast on 400 radio stations, a very large majority are dispensationalists. Halsell's book painstakingly documents part of the political consequences of dispensationalist prophecy in our day. Yes, the spread of this voice is dangerous, because the content of this voice is dangerous.

**A. Knowledge of Good and Evil.** I can recall saying during an argument, "I know I am right. You must be mistaken." That at least is more polite than "I am right and you are wrong," but the feeling is the same. Of course we realize that each side is convinced of its rightness, or there would be no argument. Communities argue too. Canada and the U.S. have debated damage from and solutions for acid rain for several years. This argument differs from the previous example,

because even though the U.S. side may not have felt "right," any admission of being wrong would have been too expensive. We have come toward that admission now.

But what would happen in a personal argument -- or in the Canada-U.S. debate on acid rain -- if one side said: "I am good and you are evil." How would you settle any argument? Would you give in, just a little bit, to evil? Of course not. Wrong, error, mistake is partial; a wrong view partially contains the right, so we negotiate. But not with evil.

In his "Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ" (Old Time Gospel Hour, 1983), Jerry Falwell says that the Russians (the usual term used by dispensationalists) will invade Israel, and their forces will be annihilated "on the mountains of Israel." The battle will end this way: "Scripture tells us that five-sixths (83 percent) of the Russian soldiers will have been destroyed (Ezek. 39:2). The first grisly feast of God begins (Ezek. 39:4,17-20). A similar feast would seem to take place later, after the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 19:17-18, Matt. 24:28). The communist threat will cease forever." Since Armageddon, the world's final battle, will have been fought, a lot of other things will cease forever also. "Seven months will be spent in burying the dead" (Ezek. 39:11-15), adds Falwell.

No sympathy is wasted on the devastated. "There are some very recent developments in Russia," said Falwell in 1979, foretold "by the prophet Ezekiel, which point up the soon return of our Lord. These communists are God-haters, they are Christ-rejecters and their ultimate goal is world conquest. Some 26 hundred years ago, the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel prophesied ..." just such a nation, north of Israel, as Russia is ("Dr. Jerry Falwell Teaches Bible Prophecy," Old Time Gospel Hour, 1979).

Pat Robertson and most of the politically inclined dispensationalists speak about the Soviet Union in this vein. It is indicated that President Reagan shares this view also. James Mills of the California State Senate reported on 1971 conversations with the then Governor Reagan (*San Diego Magazine*, August 1985). Mr. Reagan referred to the Ezekiel prophecy, noting that "Gog, the nation that will lead all the other powers of darkness against Israel, will come out of the north. Biblical scholars have been saying for generations that Gog must be Russia." And since the only powerful nation on the north is "Russia," the question is settled. Earlier it did not make sense, said Mr. Reagan. "Now it does, now that Russia has become communistic and atheistic, now that Russia has set itself against God."

That was in 1971. a long time ago, and everyone, even governors and presidents, are entitled to their own beliefs. Yes, but belief provides perspective and influences action. In 1983 Jerry Falwell attended National Security briefings and discussed plans for a nuclear war with the U.S.S.R. with top officials. Arrangements for the meeting came from President Reagan. (See Grace Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics*, p. 47.) According to Hal Lindsey, writer of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, with Mr. Reagan's approval he gave a talk to Pentagon strategists on nuclear war with the Soviet Union (*ibid.*).

On the other hand --we are fine. "America has more God-fearing citizens per capita than any other nation on earth," says Falwell. And because the Bible says that the gospel is to be preached to the whole world before the end, it will be so, says Falwell. Then, because his interpretation of the Bible is always colored by his reading of the situation, Falwell notes that God could use any nation for this, but "we have the churches, the schools, the young people, the media, the money and the means ..." (*Listen America!* New York: Doubleday, 1980), so we will evangelize the world. Using the term "evil empire" for the Soviet Union may not be a rhetorical device or a matter of style, but a matter of belief. As in our earlier example, if good is confronting evil, there can be no negotiation. Peace then is not possible, we cannot compromise with the Soviet Union. In that case, our military build-up and total inability or unwillingness to make any step toward disarmament reveals itself in a different light. If our leaders are depending on dispensations, we may be arming ourselves not in a world of international politics -- but for God's battle when Good will overcome Evil and open the world for the Second Coming of Christ.

**B. Hope and hopelessness.** The reader probably noticed that prophecies are read by dispensationalists as railroad timetables. However much the scenarios may vary from each other with each person giving his own, yet each gives it with complete certainty. This is possible because to these interpreters the future is determined in all its parts. It is so clearly determined that most of the dispensational writers I have read present time charts to indicate which event follows which in lineal progression. And because there is an insatiable appetite for this kind of reading, the output is so great that there is now even an *End-time News Digest* edited by Jim McKeever of Medford, Oregon. All this is possible because dispensationalism is thoroughly deterministic. If we live in such a cut-and-dried world, what then can we do? What difference would be made by anyone's beliefs and actions?

"We are in a terminal era, close to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, in which angelic forces are warring against demonic forces for the control of this planet that wandered away from the Lord," writes the Rev. Carlos L. Ramirez in a sermonette in the *Amarillo Globe-Times* (April 9, 1984).

Amarillo, Texas, the town where Pantex, the final assembly plant for nuclear weapons is located, is one of the most religious towns in the U.S. The book about life, religion and the bomb in Amarillo, *Blessed Assurance* by A. J. Mojtabai, is recommended reading for everyone -- but most of all for Christians. This town of 160,000 people has one synagogue, ten Roman Catholic and 191 Protestant (64 Baptist) churches. In addition, there are some Bahais and other small and diverse religious groups. The town is immersed in religion -- for anxiety relief? Mojtabai records some of the religious signs that abound: "Jesus is Lord of Amarillo" or "Jesus Christ is king of kings. Alternators started."

"I really think there is nothing much us human beings can do," (*Blessed Assurance*, p. 79)

Mojtabai records. "...I think that the things that are in God's timetable and these times are going to happen and ain't a whole lot we can do...we might prolong it...but I think it is prophesized, and I think it's gonna come to pass" (*ibid.*, p. 80).

These voices speak of utter powerlessness -- it's all God's ballgame -- we might prolong it, that is all. One might as well go on making bombs, and a living. One is just participating in God's plan.

Since Scofield promulgated his dispensations at the turn of the century, new notes have been added to his deterministic scheme. One new emphasis surfaces not only in Amarillo, but on the question of weapons production in general. Since God is going to destroy, or partly destroy, this earth, or at least decrees "some nuclear holocaust," then believers may -- even should support the means of destruction. At present the great men of dispensationalism agree and support the military budget.

A second new note centers on Israel. We saw that Scofield expected the "time of the Gentiles" to end with the coming of the Lord in glory (Rev. 19:11,21), until which time Jerusalem is "politically subject to Gentile rule (Luke 21:24)" (Scofield on Rev. 14:14). Since Scofield wrote, the nation of Israel has come into being and all the sign seekers have seen a new sign. And they speak of this sign as if it had been expected all along, but hope was delayed through all the centuries until the formation of the nation rekindled it. We noted earlier that further signs are foreseen: the whole of Jerusalem needs to be a Jewish possession, the temple needs to be rebuilt. We do not know the exact location of the first and second temples. Since many people think that the temple stood where the Dome of the Rock -- one of the most holy places of Islam -- is located, or at a place near it, Jewish terrorists several times have stormed the mosque to destroy it. Christian dispensationalists have contributed significantly, together with Jews, to a temple fund, or to a legal defense fund for such terrorists.

There is a strange alliance here. Falwell, Robertson, Lindsey and hundreds of other leading preachers find Israel the key to the whole play: Armageddon will take place there, the Tribulation may largely or entirely be there, and where else would the New Jerusalem be? Remember, the New Jerusalem is where God will move his headquarters, and not in Swaggart's view alone. The political state of Israel is seen as God's Zion, God's chosen people. Therefore Israel is of central significance, so all military and economic support is to be extended to them. The best we can do, as Christians and Americans, for our eternal future, is to stand with God's people.

On the other hand these same preachers can speak calmly of the destruction of almost all the Jewish people. "The primary subject of the tribulation...is Israel." God will save 144,000 -- perhaps. But even that is no comfort to Israel. Dispensationalists agree that in the end the only people not thrown into the fiery lake are those who accept the Lord Jesus Christ. So this is a tenuous alliance, but for the time being it is an alliance.

Since Scofield dispensationalists have categorically rejected the possibility of peace. And new occasions have brought new variations on this rejection. Jerry Falwell, speaking after the Camp David agreement, acknowledged the Prime Minister of Israel and the President of Egypt, in that order as great men who truly want peace. He failed to mention the President of the U.S., Jimmy Carter, who was the architect of the accord. But it will not work, said Falwell. There will be no peace in the Middle East or elsewhere, until Jesus Christ sits on the throne of David in Jerusalem. This means there is no need to work for a just peace, no need to speak to Palestinians (never mentioned by any of the preachers) or deal with Arabs. Peace is not in the script until the coming of Christ.

Where is hope in all this? For the dispensationalists there is no hope in change, but the hope of escape belongs to them.

**C. Molding the message.** I said at various points that we basically disagree with the dispensationalists because we read the Scriptures differently. Now that we have dwelt on the visions of some major preachers, we can be more specific.

"Mold" is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "a pattern by which something is shaped," "a hollow form or matrix into which plastic material is cast or pressed." That is what I mean by molding the message. The division of history into seven dispensations is not a biblical doctrine. It is the mold that Dr. Scofield's mind -- an overly orderly mind, I came to see -- placed on the material. Millennialism was a "feeling" at times, not a doctrine. Rapture and Tribulation are newcomers arriving in the second part of the 19th century. The newest signs concerning Israel are usually not proof-texted, but sometimes are. Both Hal Lindsey and Gordon Lindsay refer to Ezekiel 36:24, where God says: "I will...gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land." And they rejoice that 2,600 years ago the prophet foretold it all. To disregard that Ezekiel is a prophet of the Babylonian exile and that those words gave hope to fellow exiles about their return is an example of molding the message.

Choosing texts with what I call the catch-as-catch-can method is also molding the message. Any text with enough warfare in it is serviceable for an end-of-the-world prediction. The resulting tone of violence characterizes the prophecies of the current prophets.

Here is an example of the contrivance and confusion that result from pushing texts into preformed molds. Ezekiel 38 and 39 are well-thumbed chapters. Revelation 20:7-10 is indebted to these chapters, which are oracles in apocalyptic language. These passages are used to point to the great battle, as standard evidence that history is coming to the end time. I referred to this text earlier and noted Mr. Reagan's interest in it. It is time we looked at Ezekiel 38:24 (verse numbers are given):

(2)Son of man, set your face toward Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and

Tubal, and prophesy against him (3) and say, Thus says the Lord God: Behold I am against you, O Gog ... (4) and I will bring you forth, and all your army ... all of them with buckler and shield, wielding swords; (5) Persia, Cush, and Put are with them,...(6) Gomer and all his hordes; Beth-togarmah from the uttermost parts of the north... many peoples are with you.

Interpreting Ezekiel 38 Pat Robertson free-quotes: "...when Israel is regathered from the nations...I am going to put hooks in the jaws of the confederation that is going to be led by someone named Gog in the land of Magog (the Soviet Union). And the people that will be with it are Beth Togarmah (Armenia), Put (Libya), Cush (Ethiopia), Gomer (South Yemen) and Persia" (CBN program, July 9, 1982).

Jerry Falwell interprets the same passage in his Bible Prophecy tapes. He tells us that the land of the God-haters, according to Ezekiel "would be Rosh -- that is Ezekiel 38 verse 2 in the American Standard Version -- Rosh, ROSH." Note that is not so in the Revised Standard Version, but earlier translations place it in v. 2. Then Ezekiel, says Falwell, "continues by mentioning two cities of Rosh. There he called Meschech and Tubal -- the names here are remarkably similar to Moscow and Tobolsk, the two ruling capitals of Russia today." Tobolsk may be interested to learn about its new status. "He also said that Russia or Rosh would invade Israel in the latter days." Then Falwell turns to verses 5 and 6. "He named those allies: Iran (Persia), South Africa or Ethiopia, North Africa or Libya, Eastern Europe (called Gomer here in Ezekiel 38)" [Robertson's South Yemen] "and the Cossacks of Southern Russia called Togarmah" (Robertson's Armenia -- whose inhabitants would not be Cossacks). Remember that for Robertson Cush means Ethiopia, and Magog is the Soviet Union. Hal Lindsey asserts that Libya refers to the whole of Arab Africa and Ethiopia to Black Africa.

According to Scofield, "The primary reference is to northern (European) powers headed up by Russia, all agree." The notion of Moscow and Tobolsk comes from Scofield, although when Scofield first outlined the stages of history, Russia was still Tsarist Russia and not the "godless" U.S.S.R.

Now can we sit with all these "learned" men and play a game? If you have a reasonable study Bible you find quite different explanations. Meshech and Tubal and Gomer and Beth-togarmah are Assyrian place names, not surprising in that place and time. The *Oxford Annotated Bible* footnote adds: "Though people and places in apocalyptic literature can often be identified, they are part of the literary equipment and should rarely be taken literally." But if you want to show that before Christ's return the Soviet Union will attack Israel according to the Scriptures, you have a lot of molding to do.

A final look at the process of molding on two points. Both of the following quotes come from Jerry Falwell. The first is from his interview in the *Los Angeles Times* (March 3, 1981). The point he makes is made by most of his fellows. He is talking about Armageddon: "And Russia will be the offender and will be ultimately totally destroyed... I don't mean every person --

Russia has many wonderful Christians there too. The underground church is working very effectively...It [the war] will come down out of the north -- that has to be the Soviet Union -- upon the midst of the earth -- Israel and the Middle East...That's why most of us believe in the imminent return of Jesus Christ."

Think for a moment. Why does Falwell believe in the imminent return of Christ? Because Ezekiel in the sixth century B.C. wrote that the enemy will come down from the north? You may want to look up the word "north" in a good concordance. If you check out the Old Testament usage in books that depict Israel as a nation in the land (i.e., not in Egypt, not in the wilderness or during the conquest of Canaan), you find that many of the references in various periods speak of the "enemy from the north." Only once did Egypt, from the south, come against Judah. Throughout their history Israel and Judah were threatened and/or invaded by their northern neighbor Syria, or by the great successive empires on the east. But in order to avoid the waterless, roadless desert, the foe from the east also came around from the north. If one looks again at the assured prediction of Mr. Falwell, one is amazed. Could a certainty be more flimsy? A final shaping is reflected in one of the tapes, "Dr. Jerry Falwell Teaches Bible Prophecy" (Old Time Gospel Hour, 1979). Going back to Ezekiel 38, the question is why the Soviet Union would invade Israel. Verse 12 says the purpose is "to seize spoil and carry off plunder...."Mr. Falwell says, 'If one removes the first two letters from this word 'spoil' he soon realizes what Russia will really be after -- obviously, oil. And that is where we find ourselves today." So much for *Hebrew* prophecy.

## What Shall We Believe? by Aurelia T. Fule

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### Reflections

It has been painful for me to read this recent apocalyptic literature. I have watched Jerry Falwell and Jimmy Swaggart on TV for months, sometimes also Pat Robertson and Jim Bakker. I am shocked that lately both Falwell and Swaggart claim to have been called to evangelize the world. What is good news (evangel) in their message?

Forty percent of Americans say they are listening to these kinds of "gospels." Thirty-four percent of Americans responding to a poll believe that nuclear war is inevitable. They hear and absorb what is said or written often enough.

In this section we have seen that through both content and method the same conclusions are reached:

— because Good must not compromise with Evil we must be prepared to defend what is Good;

— because Armageddon is coming we are to provide for the need of Israel in that battle and stand on the same side;

— because the "literal" interpretation is free to choose any text and find all texts plastic enough to mold,

the dispensational conclusion is reaffirmed: PEACE IS NOT POSSIBLE, PREPARE FOR WAR. Until the return of Christ, war will be with us. Military expenditure, even if disproportionate and unrealistic, is to be supported. That such preparations may upset the international balance of power, or even provoke war, is no reason to reject a military budget, since the final war is coming according to the will of God.

How can people live with such a view? They do not need to worry about Armageddon. The

horror of the Tribulation will not touch them because it pits only evil people against evil people. The raptured believers will be safely elsewhere.

After all the reading and listening, the central question remains: what picture of God emerges from these dreadful imaginings? The God of Rapture plays with the world and humanity. The evil that will overwhelm humanity -- Armageddon, the Tribulation -- is God-determined, as is the murder of most Jews and Gentiles. (The writers have not yet noted that these two categories do not exhaust the variety of humanity.) This view has nothing to do with the permissive will of God that allows us to live with the consequences of our actions. Rather, this is presented as the will of God for the fulfillment of the divine plan which is to save a handful of converted Jews and another handful of converted Gentiles, and destroy the rest.

What is so wrong with these men (no woman has yet become known with this kind of message) that they can preach and rejoice in a God who actively wills the destruction of most of humanity, whose idea of peace is to destroy all contrary voices, and who calls us to be fellow destroyers by sanctioning build-ups of nuclear weapons?

Feeling pain, sensing mischief and inordinate arrogance as I read books for this study. I was in need of healing. One evening I started to jot down notes for my picture of God. What I put on paper is not new, but it helped me and I want to share it with you.

God who loved us into being does not play cruelly with the universe or a planet.

God who creates women and men for freedom and for community, divine and human community, does not play pre-determination with those very creatures.

God who re-creates community through the covenant teaches us that we belong to God and to each other; that our life is fused with the life of others in sickness and in health, in poverty and in wealth.

God who came to us as a baby, God whose glory we have glimpsed in the face of Jesus Christ, is the God who is with us and for us in our birth, our life, in death and eternity.

In Jesus Christ we see that we are to attend to the present. We are called to be co-creators alongside the Creator. No one in need was turned away by Jesus because his concern for the future never overrode a response to present need.

In Jesus Christ we see that God's victory over evil and death is not by might, but by weakness, not by weapons but by suffering. Christ took upon himself our griefs, our sorrows and transgressions, and taught us the way of peace.

The Holy Spirit confirms in our heart that the divine plan for the whole of creation is mending, healing, redemption.

Praise be to God.

### **Suggestions for Further Reading**

Allan A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987).

Flo Conway, *Holy Terror* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982).

Gabriel Fackre, *The Religious Right and Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982).

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Samuel S. Hill and Dennis E. Owen, *The New Religious Political Right in America* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1982).

Robert Jewett, *Jesus Against the Rapture: Seven Unexpected Prophecies* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979).

A.G. Mojtabai, *Blessed Assurance: At Home with the Bomb in Amarillo, Texas* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).

Peggy L. Shriver, *The Bible Vote: Religion and the New Right* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1981).

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