



## The Last Judgment, Resurrection of the Body, and Eternal Life

*Eschatology*, the doctrine of the “last things,” is one of the most divisive topics among evangelical Protestants today. While today there is Amillennialism, Postmillennialism, Theonomic Postmillennialism, Historic Premillennialism, Dispensational Premillennialism, Progressive Dispensationalism, and Preterism, whether Partial or Consistent, the early Protestants all agreed in their Confessions of Faith that this life was one of suffering and that Jesus would come again to save us while judging the world. So while modern-day Christians emphasize eschatology as the essential doctrine, as evidenced by the myriads of best-sellers on this topic, the *Belgic Confession* has one simple, yet triumphant, article on the “end times.” This reminds us to keep our discussion of what will happen at the end of human history in its proper perspective.

What our *Confession* does is bring some clarity into our otherwise confusing contemporary context. To confess the “*blessed hope*” of Jesus’ return (Titus 2:14) is to unify all who are weary and heavy-laden in lifting up their eyes to heaven, expecting the consummation of their redemption to draw nigh. Along with other Protestant Confessions, the *Belgic Confession* expresses that the Church is a pilgrim people in this age, a spiritual kingdom awaiting the coming of its King who will usher in the final state of His eschatological kingdom.

### Historical perspective

In confessing that we are a persecuted people awaiting relief by our Lord, the Protestant Confessions rejected outright all forms of what they called “chiliasm.” We know this idea today as Premillennialism, which is the doctrine that teaches that Christ will return before (*pre*) the millennium (*mille annum*, thousand years) and establish an earthly kingdom for one thousand years, ruling over the world in justice and equity.

The simple confession concerning the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and the events associated with it in our *Confession* echo throughout both Lutheran and Reformed Confessions and Catechisms in rejecting all forms of Premillennialism. For example, in the 1530 Lutheran *Augsburg Confession*, which Reformed theologians followed until writing their own confessions, we read,

*“...They (the Lutherans) condemn others also, who now scatter Jewish opinions, that, before the resurrection of the dead, the godly shall occupy the kingdom of the world, the wicked being everywhere suppressed, the saints alone, the pious, shall have a worldly kingdom, and shall exterminate all the godless.”*

(Article 17)

This “Jewish opinion” condemned by the *Augsburg Confession*, that before the end Christians shall have a worldly kingdom is also expressed in the *Second Helvetic Confession*, written by Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich, sometime around 1561 and published in 1566:

*...We further condemn Jewish dreams that there will be a golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment, and that the pious, having subdued all their godless enemies, will possess all the kingdoms of the earth. For evangelical truth in Matthew chapters 24-25 and Luke chapter 18, and apostolic teaching in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 and 2 Timothy chapters 3-4 present something quite different. (Chapter 11)*

These “Jewish dreams” of a “golden age” receive a more irenic refutation in Zacharius Ursinus’ *Smaller Catechism* (*Catechesis minor*), when it asks, “*What do you believe about his return to judge the living and the dead?*” The answer is

*That just as he ascended into heaven, he will again in his human nature truly descend from there on the last day in his Father’s glory, and after all unbelievers are cast down into eternal punishment, he will deliver me and all the elect from all evil and take us to himself in the eternal and heavenly kingdom, which he has already taken possession of in my name* (Q&A 38).

An earthly reign and occupation of the kingdoms of this world by Christians is not mentioned. Ursinus’ *Larger Catechism* (*Catechesis major*) expands upon this further:

*What is the meaning of these words: “From there he will come to judge the living and the dead?”*

*That on the last day Christ will visibly return from heaven with divine power and majesty, just as when the disciples saw him ascending, and that he will judge all people who have lived from the beginning of the world and who are then left upon the earth, so that he might take to himself into the fellowship of heaven all who have truly believed in him, but cast out the rest into eternal fire along with the Devil and his angels.* (Q&A 102)

What does it mean, then, to believe in Christ who will return as judge?

*It means to be sustained by this comfort: that after a little while Christ will return so that after all the wicked have been cast out into eternal punishment, he might deliver us from all evil in body and soul, show before all creatures that in him we are innocent, and take us to himself to be with him forever.* (Q&A 103)

The Reformation vision of the “*end times*” was eminently more simple and comforting to the believer than the doctrines of Premillennialism.

## **He shall come again**

As we turn to the last article of our *Confession*, we notice that it begins with a short statement concerning the return of Jesus. It explains the phrase in the Creeds, “*He shall come again*” (*Apostles’ Creed*), and, “*He shall come again, with glory*” (*Nicene Creed*), saying,

*Finally, we believe, according to the Word of God, when the time appointed by the Lord (which is unknown to all creatures) is come and the number of the elect complete, that our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, corporally and visibly, as He ascended, with great glory and majesty to declare Himself Judge of the living and the dead, burning this old world with fire and flame to cleanse it.*

Our confession of hope about Jesus’ return is “according to the Word of God,” and not based upon the speculations so rampant in church history, whether by the Montanists of the ancient church, the Anabaptists of the Reformation period, or the science-fiction like theologies of our day. This speculation is entirely cut off because Jesus will return at “*the time appointed by the Lord*” (which is unknown to all creatures). The Lord shall return “*like a thief in the night*” (1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10) on the day and at the hour no man knows (Matthew 24:36-37). What we and the saints in heaven who cry out, “*How long,*” do know, is that this time of our Lord’s coming will be when “*the number of the elect (is) complete*” (cf. Revelation 6:9-11).

When our Lord does come, He “*will come from heaven, corporally and visibly, as He ascended.*” This is verbatim what the angel said to the disciples about our Lord in Acts 1:11. This little line is so relevant in our discussions with Premillennialists, as we point out the simple truth that Jesus will not come secretly or invisibly, but bodily and “*with great glory.*” Our *Confession* not only follows Scripture in making this confession, but also catholic doctrine in echoing the words of the *Nicene Creed*: “*He shall come again, with glory.*” Jesus himself taught this to his disciples, saying that he

would come *“in his glory ... with the clouds”* (Matthew 25:31; Revelation 1:7), evoking in us the imagery of the fire and cloud that signified the glory of the LORD in the Old Testament.

This coming has a redemptive result, as our Lord will burn *“...this old world with fire and flame to cleanse it.”* Here the language of 2 Peter 3:7 is used: *“the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire.”* This illustrates an important truth for us. Eschatology is not so much about “last things” as it is about “ultimate things.” It deals with the big picture of God’s plan for his creation. The creation that God pronounced “very good” and which we turned evil will be cleansed. Unrighteousness will be turned to righteousness (2 Peter 3:13), the curse will be ended (Revelation 22:3), and thus *“all things will be made new”* (Revelation 21:5). This means that grace does not replace nature, but grace restores nature. In other words, the purpose of redemption and consummation is to renew creation. Paradise lost will become Paradise regained – only greater!

## **The resurrection**

The first aspect of that recreation of all things is the resurrection of the bodies of all men, as the *Confession* says, *“Then all men will personally appear before this great Judge, both men and women and children, that have been from the beginning of the world to the end thereof, being summoned by **the voice of the archangel, and by the sound of the trumpet of God.**”*

The *Confession* uses the apostle Paul’s words of comfort from in 1 Thessalonians 4 to prove the Second Coming and general resurrection. Note this well, in the face of the Premillennial doctrine of the *rapture* of the Church. This doctrine teaches that before the Millennium Jesus will secretly return and those who believe in him will be “raptured” up and taken to heaven. Yet, what we learn from 1 Thessalonians and our *Confession*, is that the rapture of the Church *is* the Second Coming of our Lord. Paul clearly states that the Lord *“will descend from heaven”* and describes this with three metaphors: a cry of command, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God. These are all climactic, military terms that speak of a visible coming, not a secret one.

On that climactic occasion *“all the dead shall be raised out of the earth, and their souls joined and united with their proper bodies in which they formerly lived.”* The souls of the dead, both the righteous and unrighteous, shall be reunited to their bodies, which lie in the grave. In the same way that we saw that God shall take what exists in the earth, purge it, and thus renew, so too with the “proper bodies” of all who have died. As Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 15, the resurrection body will be the same, but qualitatively different. What will happen to those who are alive at Christ’s coming? The *Confession* goes on to say that *“they shall not die as the others, but be changed in the twinkling of an eye, and from corruptible become incorruptible,”* citing 1 Corinthians 15:51-52.

## **To judge the living and the dead**

After Christ’s return, the resurrection of the dead, and the transformation of the living, comes the final judgment before the righteous Judge of all the earth (e.g., 96:13), in which

*...the books (that is to say, the consciences) **shall be opened, and the dead judged according to what they have done in this world, whether it be good or evil. Nay, all men shall give account of every idle word they have spoken, which the world counts amusement and jest; and then the secrets and hypocrisy of men shall be disclosed and laid open before all.***

## **The eternal state**

Because of this opening of the books of all men before the Lord, the “consideration of this judgment is justly terrible and dreadful to the wicked and ungodly.” Revelation so vividly describes this judgment, in which all the people of the earth, especially the great, the rich, and the powerful, will hide themselves in caves and among rocks. Then they will say to the rocks and mountains, *“Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”* (Revelation 6:12-17)

Surprisingly, to our natural inclination, this judgment is *“most desirable and comfortable to the righteous and elect.”* The *Confession* has already proclaimed that in Christ we have already passed the final judgment. Christ satisfied the justice of God and the punishment due our sins, despite our being *“guilty and worthy of damnation”* (art. 20). Christ appeased the wrath of God on our behalf, suffering hell itself in order to reconcile us to God (art. 21). Therefore, by faith alone we are justified. This means all Christ’s merits are ours and we have full salvation in him. Because of Christ’s works imputed to us, we are freed from fear, terror, and dread in approaching God (art. 22).

On the last day, then, we shall rejoice, *“...because then (our) full deliverance shall be perfected,”* we *“shall receive the fruits of (our) labor and trouble,”* and our *“innocence shall be known to all.”* While we *“shall see the terrible vengeance which God shall execute on the wicked,”* who will be *“tormented in the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels,”* we *“shall be crowned with glory and honor.”* We will hear *“the Son of God ... confess (our) names before God His Father and His elect angels.”* We shall feel Jesus’ compassion because *“all tears shall be wiped from (our) eyes.”* Our *“gracious reward”* will be possession of *“such a glory as never entered into the heart of man to conceive.”* For these reasons the last Day is not to be feared, but expected *“with a most ardent desire, to the end that we may fully enjoy the promises of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. AMEN.”*

May all of us as God’s people be confident of what we believe and why as we live as pilgrims in these dark days, always being prepared to give an answer to those who ask. In addition, may our hearts be lifted homeward as we pray, *Amen, come, Lord Jesus.*

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### **Study/application questions for article 37**

1. How important is the topic of “eschatology?”
2. How is the *Belgic Confession’s* explanation of the “last days” different from what you may have previously learned?
3. Do Reformed Christians believe in a “rapture?” Explain.
4. What will happen to the heavens and earth when Christ returns? (2 Peter 3:5-7, 10-13; Revelation 21-22)
5. What does the Second Coming cause in us?