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WHAT PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE ABOUT THE COMING OF CHRIST

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CURRENT QUESTIONS AND PRESBYTERIAN BELIEFS

THERE HAS BEEN much discussion about the second coming of Christ, the end times, the rapture, and the millennium in the last few years. The coming of the new millennium sparked the interest of many persons. A common use of the term millennium refers to the thousand-year reign of Christ found in Revelation 20. Although they are not necessarily linked, the end of the second millennium in the year 2000 prompted many Christians to believe that the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth was imminent and to be preceded by the second coming of Christ. Fueled also by the enormous sales¹ of the *Left Behind* book series (by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins) and the recently released *Left Behind* movie, people inside and outside the church are asking what the Bible teaches concerning the end times.

That so many are asking these questions can only be good. The Bible speaks of the return of Christ in striking terms. In the Words of Institution spoken at the Lord's Table we hear, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). The return of Christ and the consummation of the kingdom are central to Presbyterian belief and practice. It excites in us an expectation that God continues to redeem the world:

Our hope rests, therefore, in that One who is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (Rev. 1:8, 17; 22:13). The Lamb who was slain has become Lord forever and ever (Rev. 5, 14, 21), and the Lamb is none other than Jesus, the embodiment of God's love and the revelation of God's intention to save.

This means then that we wait with eager expectancy for that time when God will dwell with us and “wipe away every tear . . . and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more . . .” (Rev. 21:3–4). We hope for the time when God will give to the thirsty “water without price from the fountain of the water of life” (Rev. 21:6).²

When Presbyterians discuss matters surrounding the end of time and the second coming of Christ, we practice a restraint that we believe is consistent with the teaching of the Scriptures and our understanding of God. “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matt. 24:36).

- Presbyterians affirm that “the reality of God’s Kingdom was proclaimed by the prophets, manifested in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord, is present with us now, and will be fully manifested at our Lord’s return.”³
- God has not revealed to human beings the time when all things will be fulfilled; this preserves in us a sense of urgent watchfulness.
- Thus Presbyterians refuse to speculate on the time of the return of Christ. We fully believe in God’s sovereignty in these matters and do not look to our actions as causing or making more imminent the return of Christ.
- We look forward to the time when the cosmos will be redeemed from its bondage to sin, decay, and death.

Many people within and outside the Presbyterian Church are familiar with books and movies regarding the return of Christ. Some of the church’s documents provide parameters for evaluating teachings about last things. Two of these parameters are especially helpful:

- Humans are saved only in Christ, by grace through faith. Any teaching that indicates that God saves humans by works in some ages and by faith in other ages is outside the faith that the church has professed through the centuries.

- God has made one revelation to one covenant people. The God revealed in the Scriptures has dealt graciously with the covenant people throughout history. Any teaching that indicates that God’s character changes, that God is capricious, is outside the faith that the church has professed through the centuries.⁴

A healthy appreciation for Christ’s return in glory is central to Christian faith. The General Assembly paper “Eschatology: The Doctrine of Last Things” speaks of the importance of last things for the Christian life:

The eschatology of the Bible addresses the individual with a powerful call to a life of trust and obedience. The eschatological hope buoys up the individual with confidence that God’s redemptive purpose will not be thwarted. Far from inviting the individual to lapse into a quietistic mood of waiting for escape from this “vale of tears” or of ticking off the unfolding “signs of the times,” the eschatological thrust of the Bible calls the individual into action. Jesus’ own life is set before us as the example of One who participates already in God’s eschatological Kingdom. Jesus’ life reveals that anticipatory living—living which discloses the character of life in the fully-manifested Kingdom—involves active work at unmasking and overcoming evil in its many forms; constant effort to be on the side of those in need; ministries of healing and teaching; profound trust in God; and proclaiming the gospel of reconciliation to all.

From the example given us by Jesus, undergirded by the eschatological content of the Bible and blessed with hope, there flows a kind of life appropriate to the individual who is tilted toward the future. It consists of daily participation in the Kingdom of Heaven, which is inspired by the intervention of prayer and the imitation of Christ, and is displayed in the propensity to love, a deep commitment to justice, and the determination effectively to oppose any interests which degrade or endanger the quality of human life.⁵

The doctrine of last things also has significant implications for the church’s mission:

The implications of Bible eschatology are similar when they are applied to the whole people of God, the *Church*.

Without a vision for the future, any community, religious or secular, cannot long survive. That is why the teleological dimension of our heritage is so precious. The confidence in the future vindication of God's way with evil and the redemption of the world enables us as a community of faith, hope, and love to put ourselves collectively on the line in the struggle against corruption and decay. It enables us to enter into this struggle as vigorously as if it were the eve of the Last Day, yet without being forced to the despair, the haste, the sectarianism that accompany the conviction that world history has played out its predestined course and the Day is actually at hand.

The vision of God's planned future vouchsafed by the Cross and Resurrection enables the church to continue and intensify its evangelical mission-thrust impelled above all by the joyous conviction that God's redeeming will cannot be thwarted and people can be helped and led even now to the point of sharing in His Kingdom.

Faith in God's purpose enables us as a community of believers to make common cause with persons of good will everywhere in the effort to preserve the earth as a healthy, life-supporting place. Christians are by no means the only people who deeply cherish the world and life within it. In our own time, and in response to the same unremitting crisis which has excited new theological interest in eschatology, secular analyses and projections of the future have appeared in great numbers. Physical scientists, social planners, novelists, and dramatists, as well as philosophers and theologians of other religions have responded to the threat of overpopulation, nuclear war, pollution of the natural environment by modern industrialization, economic inequity, world hunger, and the insatiable consumption of the world's resources by the affluent nations. For some, doom is only a matter of time. Others, particularly the pseudo-Christian cults and new religions, despair of effecting change in the direction of events and counsel their followers to concentrate on the inner psychic renewal of the individual and the security of membership in the sect. Yet others see human inventiveness and the development of new resources as means adequate to

overcome world problems; these futurists call for renewed dedication to the task of protecting and enhancing the quality of human life.

Our eschatological faith enables us to join with the latter category of people in preparing the way so that the nation and the world can make the necessary but difficult decisions about energy consumption, population control, food distribution, and warfare. Our eschatological hope for the future can urge us into creative engagement with those who are even now with the tools of politics, space exploration, genetic engineering, and other technologies and ideologies shaping the worldly future. Our goal in this engagement can be to find allies in the fight against those developments which threaten the future of humankind, and to support those which strongly point in the direction of the New Jerusalem of the biblical hope.

The injunction which is borne from the promise of the consummation of God's purposes in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:9–11) comes to us with fresh impetus in our perilous times. It is this, as it always has been: "Do *all* you have to do without grumbling or arguing. So that you may be blameless and harmless, faultless children of God, living in a warped and diseased age, and shining, like lights in a dark world. For you hold in your hands the very word of life." (Phil. 2:14–16, J. B. Phillips)

Neither nihilistic despair nor romantic idealism is a proper response to the declaration of God's purpose in Jesus Christ. Rather, we work to make visible in the world the reality of God's love, which is graciously transforming us even now, and we continue to declare the good news that in Jesus Christ the future is secure. God's purpose will indeed be brought to consummation. And we have heard the good news that the One who will stand as Judge is none other than the One who gave Himself to show forth God's love for the world.⁶

The Left Behind Phenomenon

Over the past few decades a number of popular books have been written that focus on the end times. Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth* came out in 1970 and precipitated a whole wave of interest and speculation on the return of Christ and the rapture of the church.

Building on Lindsay's popularity, the movie *A Thief in the Night* was shown in many churches, and its theme song, "I Wish We'd All Been Ready," became quite popular among young people. In the late 1980s Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness* depicted spiritual warfare in the last days. At about the same time the pamphlet *88 Reasons Jesus Christ Is Coming Back in 1988* was revised as *89 Reasons Jesus Christ Is Coming Back in 1989*, but lost steam in 1990.

The *Left Behind* series, while in some continuity with these earlier books, is an even larger phenomenon. Written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, the fiction series now numbers eight volumes and has become the best-selling Christian fiction series of all time. Central to the plot is the two-stage return of Christ (see definition for *rapture* below). Christ has come and has taken the church (the "saved") away from the earth. Those "left behind" have a second chance for salvation and are engaged in a cataclysmic fight with the forces of evil. Evil forces are often disguised as good, so the battle is difficult and confusing. In this struggle with evil, some who are left behind realize the error of their ways, repent and believe in Jesus Christ, and will be rescued at the second stage of the return of Christ when all the saved will be eternally with God and all the damned are sent to hell for eternity.

Two things must be said about the theology in the *Left Behind* series. First, as a work of fiction, *Left Behind* does not present biblical teaching or theology in a systematic way. It is informed by a number of biblical passages, but it is, in the end, fiction. It should not be viewed as a key to understanding the Bible or as a textbook that describes the events surrounding the return of Christ. Second, insofar as it is informed by a theological understanding, it is a kind of premillennial dispensationalism that is described in detail in the General Assembly paper "Eschatology: The Doctrine of Last Things." In 1944 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States concluded:

It is the unanimous opinion of your Committee that Dispensationalism as defined and set forth above is out of accord with the system of the doctrine set forth in the *Confession of Faith*, not primarily or simply in the field of eschatology, but because it attacks the very heart of the Theology of our Church, which is unquestionably a Theology of one Covenant of Grace.⁷

Particular attention should be paid to the way that Jesus Christ is presented, and how the character of God is presented.

If nothing else, the high sales of the *Left Behind* series may prompt many Presbyterians to search the Scriptures afresh to understand more about God and God's way in the world. Further, many Presbyterians are unfamiliar with the book of Revelation—it would be wonderful for more Presbyterians to come to love this important book of the Bible and to immerse themselves in the picture of God and the worship of God that John presents there.

As a step in addressing these issues, the Office of Theology and Worship is furnishing resources from two major papers issued by the Presbyterian Church, one in 1944 and the other in 1978. While these two papers do not address the *Left Behind* series directly, the issues in such recent publications are similar to those that prompted the two papers.

A twenty-five-page document, “Eschatology: The Doctrine of Last Things,” commended to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as an “interpretive study of the doctrine of eschatology” by the 118th General Assembly (1978), is also available. It includes the two documents above, an extended study of eschatology, and a 1944 study on dispensationalism. You may download it from the Internet at <http://www.pcusa.org/taw/Eschatology.htm>.

In the attached appendix are a bibliography, sections from the *Book of Confessions* on the end times, and a section from *The Declaration of Faith* (commended to the church, but not part of the Constitution) that also addresses the end times.

II

RESOURCES FROM OUR CONFSSIONAL HERITAGE

THE CHURCH HAS confessed its convictions over the centuries:

*Nicene Creed (A.D. 325, 381)*⁸

He will come again in glory to judge both the living and the dead,

And his kingdom will have no end. . . .

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

*Apostles Creed (A.D. 180–8th century)*⁹

. . . from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

*Scots Confession (1560)*¹⁰

We believe that the same Lord Jesus shall visibly return for this Last Judgment as he was seen to ascend. And then, we firmly believe, the time of refreshing and restitution of all things shall come, so that those who from the beginning have suffered violence, injury, and wrong, for righteousness' sake, shall inherit that blessed immortality promised them from the beginning.

*Heidelberg Catechism (1561)*¹¹

Q. 52. What comfort does the return of Christ “to judge the living and the dead” give you?

A. That in all affliction and persecution I may await with head held high the very Judge from heaven who has already submitted himself to the judgment of God for me and has removed all the curse from me.

*Second Helvetic Confession (1561)*¹²

But Christ will come again to claim his own, and by his coming to destroy the Antichrist, and to judge the living and the dead (Acts 17:31). For the dead will rise again (1 Thess. 4:14 ff.), and those who on that day (which is unknown to all creatures [Mark 13:32]) will be alive will be changed “in the twinkling of an eye,” and all the faithful will be caught up to meet Christ in the air, so that then they may enter with him into the blessed dwelling-places to live forever (1 Cor. 15:51f.). But the unbelievers and ungodly will descend with the devils into hell to burn forever and never to be redeemed from torments (Matt. 25:46).

Westminster Confession of Faith (1647–1649)

See extensive references in “Eschatology: The Doctrine of Last Things.”

*Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934)*¹³

“Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” (Matt. 28:20.) “The word of God is not fettered.” (2 Tim. 2:9.)

The Church’s commission, upon which its freedom is founded, consists in delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ’s stead, and therefore in the ministry of his own Word and work through sermon and sacrament.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church in human arrogance could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans.

*Confession of 1967*¹⁴

The same Jesus Christ is the judge of all men. His judgment discloses the ultimate seriousness of life and gives promise of God's final victory over the power of sin and death. To receive life from the risen Lord is to have life eternal; to refuse life from him is to choose the death which is separation from God. All who put their trust in Christ face divine judgment without fear, for the judge is their redeemer. . . .

The Fulfillment of Reconciliation

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

Biblical visions and images of the rule of Christ such as a heavenly city, a father's house, 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 his will and disrupts his creation. Already God's reign is present as a ferment in the world, stirring hope in men and preparing the world to receive its ultimate judgment and redemption.

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.

"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."

*Brief Statement of Faith (1991)*¹⁵

We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.
The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and
neighbor,
and binds us together with all believers
in the one body of Christ, the Church.

The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
engages us through the Word proclaimed,
claims us in the waters of baptism,
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
and calls women and men to all ministries of the
Church.

In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and
Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and
peace.

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new
earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Extra-Constitutional Reformed Statements

*A Declaration of Faith (1977)*¹⁶

Chapter Ten—Hope in God

(1) God keeps his promises and gives us hope.

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus
God kept his promises.

All that we can ever hope for
was present in Christ.

But the work of God in Christ is not over.

God calls us to hope for more than we have yet seen.

The hope God gives us is ultimate confidence
that supports us when lesser hopes fail us.

In Christ God gives hope for a new heaven and earth,
certainty of victory over death,
assurance of mercy and judgment beyond death.
This hope gives us courage for the present struggle.

(2) All things will be renewed in Christ.

In Christ God gave us a glimpse of the new creation
he has already begun and will surely finish.

We do not know when the final day will come.

In our time we see only broken and scattered signs
that the renewal of all things is under way.

We do not yet see the end of cruelty and suffering
in the world, the church, or our own lives.

But we see Jesus as Lord.

As he stands at the center of our history,
we are confident he will stand at its end.

He will judge all people and nations.

Evil will be condemned

and rooted out of God's good creation.

There will be no more tears or pain.

All things will be made new.

The fellowship of human beings with God and each other will
be perfected.

(3) Death will be destroyed.

In the death of Jesus Christ
God's way in the world seemed finally defeated.
But death was no match for God.
The resurrection of Jesus was God's victory over death.

Death often seems to prove that life is not worth living,
that our best efforts and deepest affections go for nothing.
We do not yet see the end of death.
But Christ has been raised from the dead,
transformed and yet the same person.
In his resurrection is the promise of ours.
We are convinced the life God wills for each of us
is stronger than the death that destroys us.
The glory of that life exceeds our imagination
but we know we shall be with Christ.
So we treat death as a broken power.
Its ultimate defeat is certain.
In the face of death we grieve.
Yet in hope we celebrate life.
No life ends so tragically
that its meaning and value are destroyed.
Nothing, not even death, can separate us
from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

(4) God's mercy and judgment await us all.

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus
God has already demonstrated his judging and saving work.
We are warned that rejecting God's love
and not caring for others whom God loves
results in eternal separation from him and them.
Yet we are also told that God loves the whole world
and wills the salvation of all humankind in Christ.

We live in tension between God's warnings and promises.
Knowing the righteous judgment of God in Christ,
we urge all people to be reconciled to God,
not exempting ourselves from the warnings.
Constrained by God's love in Christ,
we have good hope for all people,

not exempting the most unlikely from the promises.
Judgment belongs to God and not to us.
We are sure that God's future for every person
will be both merciful and just.

(5) Hope in God gives us courage for the struggle.

The people of God have often misused God's promises
as excuses for doing nothing about present evils.
But in Christ the new world has already broken in
and the old can no longer be tolerated.

We know our efforts cannot bring in God's kingdom.
But hope plunges us into the struggle
for victories over evil that are possible now
in the world, the church, and our individual lives.
Hope gives us courage and energy
to contend against all opposition,
however invincible it may seem,
for the new world and the new humanity
that are surely coming.

Jesus is Lord!
He has been Lord from the beginning.
He will be Lord at the end.
Even now he is Lord.

Notes

1. Sales of the books, audio tapes, and children's tie-in books have exceeded 34 million units. See Cindy Crosby, "Left Behind: The Lawsuit" (http://www.publishersweekly.com/articles/2001226_94576.asp), February 26, 2001.
2. "Eschatology: The Doctrine of Last Things," *Minutes of the General Assembly, Journal* (Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1978), p. 224.
3. "Eschatology," p. 231.
4. See "Eschatology," p. 228.
5. "Eschatology," pp. 224-225.
6. "Eschatology," pp. 225-226.
7. "Dispensationalism," *Minutes of the General Assembly* (Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1944), pp. 123-127.
8. *Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1999), 1.2-1.3.
9. *Book of Confessions*, 2.2.
10. *Book of Confessions*, 3.11.
11. *Book of Confessions*, 4.052.
12. *Book of Confessions*, 5.074
13. *Book of Confessions*, 8.25-27.
14. *Book of Confessions*, 9.11, 9.53-9.56.
15. *Book of Confessions*, 3.11.
16. "A Declaration of Faith," *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1977, pp. 168-231.

APPENDICES

*Appendix A**Twelve Theses on Eschatology*

(The Position Statement of the Presbyterian Church on Eschatology, 1978)

1. The desire to know more of the unknown, including the future, is an authentic human characteristic.
2. The biblical tradition affirms the importance of this human concern by revealing that the course of time flows between God's sovereign Acts of Creation, Redemption, and the Consummation of His purpose.
3. The reality of God's Kingdom was proclaimed by the prophets, manifested in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord, is present with us now, and will be fully manifested at our Lord's return.
4. Following the Westminster Standards, we insist that God holds the time of the Consummation unknown in order to preserve in us a sense of immediacy and urgent watchfulness, and we refuse to tame that hope into a set of speculative predictions.
5. God's sovereignty is the first and most important affirmation in our understanding of God's final purpose, such purpose assured

by the work of Jesus Christ; and God is on His way toward the fulfillment of His purpose wherein he will be all in all.

6. The Cosmos will at last be redeemed in all its fullness from its bondage to sin, decay and death; not as the end result of any historical process which may now be observed, but purely and only because God has determined that it will be so.
7. The reward God gives to those who trust His power to complete the work of redemption is hope; not the optimistic conviction that by our own account we bring in the Kingdom, but the assurance that we can learn to prefigure and show it forth in some measure in our lives.
8. The hope for the Consummation includes the challenging possibility for resistance to the evil of the world and for the faithfulness of the Church to the end.
9. In light of the fact that God's purpose, revealed and accomplished in Christ Jesus, will be brought to full fruition, our response is to work to make visible the reality of God's love, and to declare the Good News that in Jesus Christ the future is secure.
10. Confidence in the future vindication of God's way with evil and the redemption of the world enables us as a Community of Faith, Hope and Love to commit ourselves collectively to the struggle against corruption and decay, ready always to make common cause with people of good will everywhere who seek to preserve the earth and to both maintain and enhance life.
11. There is considerable latitude for variations in eschatological position within the Reformed Tradition, but strong principles from other branches of Reformed theology provide boundaries which must be preserved. There is but one overarching covenant of grace, one covenant people, one salvation, one return of Christ, one general resurrection and one Last Judgment.

12. Our hope should never change its focus from the Savior ever with us and the worldwide ministry of reconciliation to which he has commissioned us.

Appendix B

Principles of Faith Related to Eschatology (The Study Document of the Presbyterian Church on Eschatology, 1978)

1. There is but one overarching Covenant of Grace.

(WCF, Chap. VII; note Acts 13:32, 33; Romans 9:31, 32; Galatians 3:6–8, 17, 29).

2. There is but one covenant people of God.

(WCF, Chap. XXVII, Secs. 1, 2; note Acts 10:34–36; 1 Cor. 10:1–4; Heb. 11:39, 40).

3. There is but one salvation.

(WCF, Chap. VII, Secs. 3, 5; note John 5:24; Acts 4:12; Romans 3:30).

4. There is but one destiny for God's covenant people.

(WCF, Chap. VIII, Sec. 5; note John 17:2; Eph. 1:11, 14).

5. There is but one unified written revelation of God.

(WCF, Chap. I, Sec. 9; VII, Sec. 6; note 2 Tim. 3:16, 17).

6. There is but one King, always in control.

(Shorter Catechism, 26, 28; Longer, 45; note Daniel 4:17; 1 Cor. 15:25).

7. There is but one resurrection.

(WCF, Chap. XXXIV, Sec. 2; note John 5:28, 29; Acts 24:15).

8. There is but one future judgment.

(WCF, Chap. XXXV, Sec. 1; note John 5:28, 29; Acts 17:31; Rom. 14:11, 12; 1 Cor. 5:10).

(WCF refers to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*)

“Twelve Theses on Eschatology” and “Principles of Faith Related to Eschatology” were adopted in 1978 by the Presbyterian Church in the United States, a predecessor denomination to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In 1983 the Presbyterian Church in the United States and the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America reunited to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Appendix C

Definitions

Eschatology is the study of “last things,” the culmination of history, and the return of Christ.

End Times refers to the events that immediately precede the return of Christ.

Millennium refers to a period of one thousand years. *Millennium* is used popularly in two related but distinct ways. The first meaning of millennium is a period of one thousand years on the Western calendar. We celebrated the arrival of the third millennium since the birth of Jesus Christ on January 2000 or 2001, depending on who is counting. The second common use of the term *millennium* refers to the thousand-year reign of Christ found in Revelation 20. Although they are not necessarily linked, the end of the second millennium in the year 2000 prompted many Christians to believe that the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth was imminent, preceded by the second coming of Christ. (See below, “Eschatology: The Doctrine of Last Things,” for descriptions of different views of the millennium.)

Rapture refers specifically to the two-stage coming of Christ in much literature about the end times. In the first stage Christ returns for the church, to take believers away from the earth. In the second stage Christ returns with the church to reign on earth for a thousand years. This two-stage understanding of the return of Christ is attributed to Maggie MacDonald of Port Glasgow, Scotland, in 1860. The term *rapture* does *not* appear in the Bible and has not been taught in the Presbyterian tradition (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17).

The Second Coming of Jesus Christ is the hope, common to all Christians, that Christ will return again, Christ's kingdom will be fully manifested, and the cosmos will be redeemed. While all Christians affirm this hope, there are considerable differences among Christians in the degree to which believers think Christ's return is imminent, and whether or not the time of Christ's return can be determined.

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