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**Do We Need a Special
Ethics for the Last Days?**



Ethics

Ergänzungen zur Ethik

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Do We Need a Special Ethics for the Last Days?

Thomas Schirrmacher

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

Churches, evangelists and even politicians love to base their imperatives on the argument that we are living in the Last Days. Is that biblical? Must we really know that whether God is intending to inflict judgment or bestow grace, when we develop evangelistic strategies? No! On the contrary, we must continue to proclaim the Gospel as we have always done in order to prevent judgement! The Bible preaches no special eschatological ethics.

To express it in other words: the specific ethics for the Last Days are the very same ethics of the Kingdom of God which commenced with the Coming of Christ (Luke 10:9.11.; 21:31–32). In view of the approaching judgement and the return of Christ (Acts 17:31; 1Thess 5:1–3), this ethical system has applied for centuries and will not suddenly change in the twenty-first century.

Do we really need a new ethical system for the Last Days? Must we locate our epoch on a prophetic time line in order to do God's will? No, for

God's will, as revealed in Scripture, always applies, whether the situation is worsening or improving.

Isn't it really contradictory for Christians to claim to adhere to the Bible while calculating a program for the Return of Christ, even though Scripture and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself very clearly insist that no one except God the Father knows the time or the hour (Acts 1:7; Matt 24:36.43.44.50; Mark 13:32; Luke 12:39.40.46)! If we believe in the principle of using Scripture to interpret Scripture, we should apply Christ's warning to every eschatological text. Still, let us participate in the discussion: what would be the consequences for our ethics, if we did know that the world were to end soon?

The apostle Paul gives one of the most dramatic descriptions of the 'perilous times' of the last days (2 Tim 3:1–4:8). We could ask why Paul would require Timothy to act in a concrete manner in difficult times that lay in a far distant future, but let us ignore that problem and assume that this text indeed refers to the end of human history. Men will become selfish, slanderers, seducers „ever learning, and never able to come

to the knowledge of the truth“ (vs. 7), clinging to a powerless superficial Christianity (vs. 5). Persecution will be an everyday affair (3,11–12), and things will continue to get worse (vs. 13): „For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears. And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables“ (2 Tim 4:3–4).

What conclusion does Paul draw from these predictions? Rather than developing a special ethical system, he confirms the fundamental principles of the Christian lifestyle which have always applied and continue to apply in the future: „Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. ... But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry.“ (2 Tim 4:2.5).

Speaking specifically of ethical norms for difficult times, Paul admonishes Timothy: „But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them,“ (2 Tim 3:14), i. e. Timothy is to live according to Scripture. The basic significance of Scripture, which was inspired by God through his Spirit, for salvation, doctrine and ethics (2 Tim 3:14–17), is emphasized in the context of future difficulties and judgment. Timothy does not need any special knowledge of the future, only familiarity with the Bible

and its norms „that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works,“ (2 Tim 3:17). In the Great Commandment, Jesus admonishes the disciples to work: „Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world,“ (Matt 28:20). Jesus‘ ethics suffice – from the Crucifixion until his return.

The principles described here for evangelization apply equally for the rest of Biblical-Christian ethics. Whether we are living in the Last Days or not, the commandment to love and the Ten Commandments are other central ethical principles such those defined in Romans 12:1–2 or 2 Tim. 3:16–17 remain untouched. God’s assistance and directions for our lives apply whether we live in the best of times or the worst, and whether judgement or revival are pending.

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

In his sermons on the Last Days, Jesus exhorts the disciples to watch (Matt 24:32–35–25:13). He uses the metaphor of the unexpected thief in the night (Mat 24:43.50), whose time is unknown to the master of the house (Matt 24:44.50; 25:13). The only preventive is to wake and not become lazy. Jesus expects his disciples only to live watchfully, whether in the first century or the twenty-first. Nothing indicates that he preached any sort of rules for the Last Days other than those he proclaimed to his first century audience.

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

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

Is the promise given in 2 Chronicles 7:14 no longer valid for the Last Days? „If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.“ Of course it is always valid, even when a nation or even the whole world is ripe for judgment (The judgment is described in verse 13).

The Old Testament gives us many examples of judgments announced by prophets but postponed due to repentance. The Book of Jonah provides the

best known example. The prophet preached that Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days (Jonah 3:4), but the Assyrians' repentance reverted God's judgment. Jonah, angry as he was, had already known how God would act: „I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil,“ (Jonah 4:2). Jonah would have preferred God to judge Nineveh, just as many modern Christians prefer to preach judgment and devastation rather than the Gospel. The Church Father Chrysostomos, speaking of Jonah in his ‚Homily on Repentance‘, emphasizes that Christian proclamation often seems to devastate hope, but never truly disintegrates it, for the Gospel points to the true hope which lies only in God.

Prophetic announcements which God had not confirmed by oath could always be reverted or changed. Only when he had sworn to destroy, was the judgment irreversible. When he swears to punish Eli's family, then the High Priest's family is lost: „I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the LORD saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed“ (2 Sam 2:30). The original promise depended on conditions, but the oath formula „Be it far from me“ makes his pronouncement irrevocable.

In Jonah 1:2, God commands the prophet to preach the message in Nineveh. The command is repeated after Jonah

is liberated from the whale's belly (3:2) and carried out with the classical missionary methods: Jonah preaches and the citizens of the city believe. The proclamation of the coming judgment can also be evangelistic – Peter preached ‚only‘ judgment at Pentecost (Acts 2:14–36) as did Paul in Athens (Act 17:14–31), but both then preach grace, when their audiences repent. Jonah 3:8.10 uses the term ‚turn away‘, otherwise used for Israel's repentance from sin to return to God!¹ Jonah 3:5–9 describes a mass conversion by the Gentiles seldom paralleled in Israel's history. The story ends with the joyful note (3:10): „And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.“ Jesus refers to the Assyrians' reaction in his reproach of his Jewish contemporaries: „For as Jonas was a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of Man be to this generation. The men of Nineveh shall rise up in the judgment with this

generation, and shall condemn it: for they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here,“ (Luke 11:30–23; see also Matt. 12:41). How embarrassing! Gentiles become a role model for the Jews.

Jonah, by the way, was a good theologian, for he knew that God was compassionate towards the Gentiles, not just to the Israelites, and this knowledge infuriated him: „O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil,“ (4:2). he had flown from his assignment for theological reasons, not for personal ones. he could not bear the fact that Gentiles receive the same grace as the Jews.

Using a gourd, God, however, provides the prophet with a picture of his relationship to the Gentiles, concluding the

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

book with a justification for world missions. „And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?“ (4:11).

Even when God has proclaimed judgment, he sometimes apparently revokes his decision, as the example from Job proves. When he has sworn to do something, however, there is can be no repeal. God's unconceivable grace expresses itself in the fact that, in contrast to his grace, judgments are seldom confirmed by oath., his covenant with Noah that the earth would never again be destroyed by flood, was confirmed by an oath (Gen. 8:20–9:17). The history of the Israelites provides other examples. Both are mentioned in Isaiah 54:9: „For this is as the waters of Noah unto me: for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth; so have I sworn that I would not be wroth with thee, nor rebuke thee“ (See also verse 10).

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

Where does the Bible claim that an oath is only necessary when the truth is in question?

So why swear? Let's look at several examples. According to Hebrews 7:20–21, the Old Testament Aaronic priesthood was not based on an oath, but the eternal priesthood of Christ according to the order of Melchizedek was (see: Psalm 110:4): „(For those priests were made without an oath; but this with an oath by him that said unto him, The Lord sware and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedek:) By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament.“ The Aaronic priesthood could be abolished, because its validity had not been confirmed by oath, whereas Jesus' priesthood, ratified by oath, will never end.

God's oath to Abraham is justified in Hebrews 6:16–18 with the following words: „For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife. Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.“ God's oath ratifies the immutability of his decision. In Isaiah 45:23–24, he describes his oath as a „word ... that shall not return ...“. Psalm 110:4 says: „The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent.“ Psalm

132:11 describes God's oath to David in similar words: „The LORD hath sworn in truth unto David; he will not turn from it“ and David uses the same terminology in Psalm 119:106: „I have sworn, and I will perform it.“

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

The Church has hope in the face of judgment

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

Job refers to a tree apparently cut down and dried out, an image also used in Old Testament prophecy: „For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease“ (Job 14:7).

We therefore have only one avenue road to renewal of political and social conditions. As essential as it is to refer to the Law of God in order to elucidate what has gone wrong and to clarify God's will, we must remember: „If my people, which are called by my name,

shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land“ (1 Chron. 7:14). The Church can then truly pray for society and for government. Let us hope that God must not conclude: „And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none,“ (Eze. 22:30), as he did in Israel.

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

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

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

God can wait patiently while man's iniquity increases: „Yet many years didst thou forbear them, and testifiedst against them by thy spirit in thy prophets: yet would they not give ear: therefore gavest thou them into the hand

of the people of the lands“ (Neh. 9:30), but when ‚iniquity is full‘, his patience is at an end, and he inflicts the heaviest of penalties such as epidemics, war, death or exile, for the degree of sin increases as time passes, especially in a people over several generations.

Thus, God tells Abraham in Gen. 15:(14–)16 that he must wait four generations before his descendants can return to Canaan „for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.“ Shortly before to Israel’s entry into the Promised Land, he reminds the people that he has not chosen to give the land to them because of their own righteousness, but because of Canaanites’ wickedness (Deut. 9:4–5).

Jesus admonishes the scribes and the Pharisees in the same way: „Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers!“ (Matt. 23:32), and Paul, speaking of the Jews in 1 Thessalonians 2:14 says: „Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost.“ The Israelites’ century-long persecution of their own prophets culminated in the Crucifixion (see the Parable of the husbandmen in Matt. 21:33–41; Mark 12:1–9 and Luke 20:9–16), but the Jews continued to add to their guilt. The ‚utmost wrath‘ which Paul speaks probably means the destruction of Jerusalem and the defeat of the Jews in 70 A. D. God held back the judgment for many centuries as their hearts became harder, but even after the Crucifixion, he waited a full generation (Acts 2:40: „Save your-

selves from this untoward generation.“) before carrying out his word (See also: Matt. 24:34; 23:36; Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32. See also ‚generation‘ in Matt 12:41.45; Luke 17:25).

Speaking of Babylon, God says. „Prepare slaughter for his children for the iniquity of their fathers; that they do not rise, nor possess the land, nor fill the face of the world with cities“ (Isa. 14:21). he prevents the wicked from taking over the world, as he did in the Flood and at the Tower of Babel. („and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do „; Gen 11:16). The death penalty that followed the Fall prevents Sin from becoming too powerful and lasting eternally (Gen. 3:22).

In the same way, God is willing to spare Sodom, should a sufficient number of righteous people still live there (Gen 18:24–30; see also 19:29) – a number he reduces several times at Abraham’s entreaty. Sodom, however, has become so godless that only Lot is left. Jerusalem is no better in Jeremiah 5:1: „Run ye to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now, and know, and seek in the broad places thereof, if ye can find a man, if there be any that executeth judgment, that seeketh the truth; and I will pardon it.“

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

„By the blessing of the upright the city is exalted: but it is overthrown by the mouth of the wicked“ (Pro. 11:11) that a righteous group of people can

postpone or repeal judgement over their society.

Abraham's insistent plea for Sodom and Gomorra (Gen. 18:16–33) demonstrates clearly the importance of godly people can be for a godless society. God would have spared the cities for the sake of only ten righteous inhabitants (Gen 18:32.35).

It is thus that the most terrible thing that can happen to a society occurs when God can find no more believers in its midst, no godly people willing to fill the gap and pray: „And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none“ (Exe. 22:30).

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

These principles apply not only to peoples or churches but also to each individual. God takes our development into account. Two people may commit the same sin, but one may be taking a step away from more serious sin, while the other is descending into deeper rebellion. God punishes some of Israel's kings, for example, for introducing ido-

latry with a single image but commends others who ignored a multitude of idols, because they had eliminated a major, widely spread idolatry. (See Asa in 2 Chron. 15:17: „But the high places were not taken away out of Israel: nevertheless the heart of Asa was perfect all his days.“)

The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Matt. 13:24–30 and 36–43)

„Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? he said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.“

„Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the house: and his disciples came unto him, saying, Declare

unto us the parable of the tares of the field. he answered and said unto them, he that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world.“

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

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

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

As long as the Kingdom of God is growing and the children of the Kingdom are increasing, the time of evil will not end. A Christian who notices only the growth of wickedness ignores the fact that its development is only permit-

ted in order to safeguard the growth of the good seed.

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

Annotations

Anmerkungen

¹ See: David F. Wells. *Turning to God: Biblical Conversion in the Modern World*. Paternoster: Exeter; Baker Book House: Grand Rapids (MI), 1989. p. 31.

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