

Reckoning with apocalypse: Time to turn around

by [Dale Aukerman](#) in the [December 8, 1999](#) issue

A hundred years ago many Christians envisioned Christianity winning acceptance among every country and people of the world. As it turned out, this century has seen a drastic erosion of Christianity in the very centers from which it launched its missionary activity—namely, in Europe and North America. That erosion has been hastened by—among other things—two world wars and the unleashing of the atomic bomb.

Since mid-century, some Christians have foreseen not global conversion but global destruction, hastened perhaps by a nuclear catastrophe. Many of the scenarios of the end predict a rescue or rapture of Christians out of suffering, in anticipation of Christ's millennial reign.

Both the expectation of Christian triumph and the expectation of judgment have contained an idolatrous element. Neither has reckoned with the meaning of apocalypse. Some people have dismissed the revealing of God's word in the apocalypse, preferring instead a future that humans can manage. Others have privatized the apocalypse, dismissing its call for an obedient church that is prepared to suffer with the poor and oppressed and is made up of disciples who hopefully anticipate the fulfillment of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Still others resign themselves to the fear of computer-generated chaos.

Believers may legitimately reckon with "a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire" (Heb. 10:27), the cataclysmic harvest of human evil—individual and corporate. But such a prospect often takes on the false solidity of an inescapable truth and obscures what should be paramount: hope in God, who is incomparably gracious.

In the Exodus narrative, Pharaoh persistently rejected God's declared message from Moses and Aaron. Similarly, in the times of the prophets the people repeatedly refused to heed God's call to turn back toward God from imminent catastrophe. Jesus foresaw that the populace in Jerusalem would persist in rejecting God's call, with awesome judgment as the result. "How often would I have gathered your

children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Matt. 23:37). That "and you would not" remains archetypal for all collective rejection of Jesus that leads to doom.

It may be that the current world situation is similar and that God, who sees the hearts of all, knows that in the period ahead humanity will not turn back from folly and world cataclysm. But if God knows that, humans do not—and cannot—know it. Since Christians dare not presume to know the timing of the End, they need also to keep in view that impending judgment can be averted if people turn to God. God can deliver us from any seeming fate, but the urgency of turning around presses upon us all.

When Christians think in these terms, the awesomeness of the present is constituted not primarily by threats to a sustainable future, but rather by the word of the eternal, almighty God. The central danger is not perishing in some computer-generated nuclear inferno, nor in clouds of chemical or biological destruction, nor by militia or terrorist attacks. The Y2K problem is not ultimately pivotal. The primary problem lies in our relation—or lack of relation—to God. In these times as in every other, the central jeopardy is separation from God.

God's word through the prophets often centered on the verb *shuv*, to turn--to turn from disobedience and rebellion and return to Yahweh. A turning of one's existence is conversion, actualized in obedience to God's will, and it involves unconditional trust in God and renunciation of all competing sources of help.

In the evangelical tradition, such a turning happens when individuals see the magnitude of their sin and recognize their extreme need for repentance and forgiveness. They deplore the enormities of private or underworld sinning—the breakdown of the family, sexual promiscuity, pornography, drug abuse, crime, indiscriminate youth violence. Many churchfolk focus on the pressing need for winning sinful individuals to "a saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ" before the inevitable cataclysm hits us.

Yet many of these people have little sense of the collective sinning done in and by society. Many of them do not understand that the threat of catastrophic judgment is brought on by their nation as nation and by its vested interests: neglect of the least privileged in this country and beyond, economic exploitation, popular media saturated in violence, the support of repressive client regimes, military buildup and

the corporate destruction of the environment. By contrast, many people in "peace and justice" movements often see only the latter types of wrongdoing, not the more private type.

Biblically, sin and judgment are both individual and collective. The turning toward God, then, is partially manifested in individual conversion, but also in a collective reorientation. Christians can neglect neither the individual nor the collective turning and returning to God.

The alternatives laid out in Deuteronomy 30 summarize God's message proclaimed by all the prophets: "I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. . . . Therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live." Two awesome, contrary possibilities stand before us: Trust in God, cleave to God and be greatly blessed; or defy God and move into catastrophe.

Churchfolk contradict Deuteronomy 30 and the whole message of the Bible when they suppose that an imminent cataclysm is inevitable, and that efforts to address collective evils are a waste of time. This outlook assumes that God is not giving humanity the choice between life and doom. They also contradict Deuteronomy 30 when they dismiss the prospect of God's judgment, presuming to create their own future. Seen biblically, however, God does offer this choice. If there is not the turning back, then the catastrophe will come—maybe sooner, maybe later. But for the moment, God is still giving time, and strives to lead humankind back from total destruction.

This *shuv*, individual and corporate, is therefore not something simply within human power to decide and effect. Ultimately God alone can rescue human beings, individually and collectively, from "the evil one." Even disciples do not have it within their power to bring about this turnaround.

Some activists tend to see themselves as constrained to become saviors and guarantors of the future through these strategies and efforts. God's word, however, demands a difficult turning to desist from self-help, to leave room for God's sovereign action.

In peace and justice movements, that turning is very much needed. Disciples recognize that within their human capabilities they cannot turn the world around. They cannot overcome. But God in Jesus has overcome and is turning the world around. Jesus, undeserving, took our deserved suffering and stood—and

stands—with each and all in undeserved suffering. Jesus gave himself over to the preponderance of oppressive and lethal power (not as a fate but in trust and obedience to God) and overcame it. Disciples on the brink of a new millennium, like their counterparts in the first century, no longer set their hope on human capabilities and political possibilities, but only on God's power to act and save.

What then is the Christian alternative to seeking a part in humanly managing the future? How can disciples work toward a turning, without losing sight of the fact that we can hope only in God? All Christian hope has as its source and grounding the resurrection of Jesus. There the living God overwhelmed death and its power to commandeer societal structures. Because of this hope, grounded in the risen Christ, disciples can stand against all defeated structures.

Giving room to God's acting is far from passive. Disciples seek to embody and proclaim the incursion of God's rule, and therefore resist, rather than stand with, structures set against that rule. In their lives and community, as a messianic city on the hilltop, they strive to embody and attest God's will for the world as a whole.

Disciples work toward the individual and collective turning from death toward life. They aim for nonhierarchical leadership, for societal dynamics centered in servanthood (not power-seeking), for organizing political and economic power into units small enough to depend mainly on face-to-face interaction. They use no weapons, no violence to counter violence, but rather rely on acts of loving resistance and noncooperation. Disciples intercede and enter into prayer combat against the powers of destruction, and stand with those who suffer. Such guidelines are not utopian. They are simply Christian and evangelical.

Jesus warned, "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 14:3-5). When some of those encompassed by the collective choice of death choose life, in active ways, then the realm of life is a little enlarged and the realm of death a little diminished. Even if most do not turn back and global disaster comes, any human being can turn back and not perish in it.

As disciples speak and live their faith and hope grounded solely in Jesus Christ, they become for others signs of hope, pointing not to the future secured by human hands, but the one intended by God. They point to God's actions that are bringing that future into reality, in this millennium and the next. The story in Jonah 3 of the repentance of the Ninevites and their rescue from destruction can be set against the intimations that an inevitable apocalypse is upon us. In our present Ninevah as well,

the incredible could come to pass.