



The End of Days

Opening

What if our theology could get up from our armchairs and move into our world? That would be something worth paying attention to. This is The Armchair Anabaptist podcast.

<intro song> Lay your guns down, down on the floor. There ain't no good in those guns anymore. Take my hand and let me kiss your cheek. Let our friendship be sweet. <end>

“Because Mennonites have usually found that the way to faithfulness is to separate from others and eventually if only I am here, then at least I'll agree with myself.”

“And I don't think that we can say we love someone and then shoot them. It doesn't make sense.”

“I always tell folks that, ‘Look at - if you're in a debate and winning the debate becomes more important than reflecting love towards the person you're debating, then do the Kingdom of God a great service and shut up.’”

“How do we encourage people to see nonviolence as something more than a position about war?”

“Because we're not just sitting around doing podcasts and theology, we're actually trying to live our lives as Christians.”

<song> This is a reckoning between you and me. The righting of all wrongs as we eat and as we drink. <end>

Introduction

Kevin Wiebe: You're listening to The Armchair Anabaptist. This is episode number nine, The End of Days. I'm Kevin Wiebe.

Jesse Penner: And I'm Jesse Penner and we are your hosts. Today we are jumping into eschatology. We are talking about the end of all things and how that relates to today. Sometimes talking about the end of all things can feel like a bit of an abstraction, that it doesn't really relate to how we live today, or how we understand things, but in an Anabaptist perspective we recognize that what is going to happen at the end actually has a deep impact on how we live our lives today.

We sat down with our panel again and we talked through this question: in our Mennonite and Anabaptist traditions and for many who hold to a position against violence, we believe that in the end God will make all things right in the world. This has been very important for our teachings about loving our enemies. So what is this kind of perspective about eternity have to do with loving our enemies? How do these things connect?

KW: That's the question we're exploring today and our guests on this episode are Dr. Greg Boyd, Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld, Pastor Cameron McKenzie, and Pastor Cyndy Warkentin.

JP: We're going to start off here with Pastor Cameron McKenzie, who's the lead pastor at Fort Garry EMC.

What does our perspective on eternity have to do with loving our enemies?

Cameron McKenzie: I think the short answer to that question is actually found in the way in which we need to develop a certain humility about our own sense of how much we know about what God is doing in the world. And that's the key line – God is doing something in the world.

Creation is unfolding in a way that coheres with God's redemptive work and God's ultimate purpose to bring creation back to the good that he initially declared in creation at the beginning. It's so easy to fall into the trap of thinking that what we interpret God to be doing in the world, and our place in that, is actually synonymous with what God is doing in the world and our place in that. And it's not.

Let me give a silly example, and I won't delve into it too deeply. You go back to the end of the first Millennium and the beginning of the second Millennium and the initiation of the Crusades.

Of course, there are all kinds of complicated motives and things that are going on, some are political, some are personal, some are ideological, but some are also genuinely theological. There is this deep desire to redeem the great saints of the church for the church, and it's clear to everybody that the Muslims are infidels, that there is such a thing as infidels, and that it's okay to actually go and kill infidels, they're like the Canaanites.

That's a way of reading the Bible, though not a really good way of reading the Bible, because if they had read it very, very carefully, you see that God's attitude toward the Canaanites is quite different than what we often think it is. But they went and they did what they did and a thousand years later, we are still reaping the corrosive and destructive fruits of that whole enterprise. An enterprise that came from Christians knowing what God was doing in the world and knew what their role in that was.

I think that the eschatological perspective, God is taking the world somewhere, should give us great pause for just humility and that even when we begin naming enemies, we don't know. What we do know is that all people have been created as God's image, as we were talking about before.

God is not willing, if I take Jesus here, that any should perish, but all should come to eternal life. God didn't send his son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. So God's heart, if I just take that as kind of a generic, general statement, God's heart is for the salvation of the world. You don't have to believe in universal salvation or universalism, to hear, in those words of Jesus, everybody out there matters, and I'm redeeming the world. That's where I'm taking the world. And all of those people out there matter in that.

So all I'm asking you to do is to live amongst them and with them in a way that enhances their ability to find their place in the redemptive work that I'm doing, rather than to live with them in a way that detracts from or in fact becomes a stumbling block. A word that Jesus uses more than once and he never uses being a stumbling block as a good thing.

That from one person's perspective might not look like non-resistance but we're making peace. That's what we're going for. It just seems to me that if that's what God's doing in the world and it's the whole world that is in God's sight in redemption, I want to live with the whole world in a way that enhances that. So to me, that's how those things work together.

And the other thing I think then that comes to me is if that's the trajectory of the story I want to make sure that I'm living with people in ways that activate the defeat of the Dragon, and nonresistance pacifism, peacemaking, are those things that seem counterintuitive to the way our world works, but our world is constantly experiencing this sort of afterglow of God's enemy and we think like God's enemy, even though God's enemy is defeated and the church is called to enter into that and to think like God, as imperfectly as we do it, to think like God and not to think like God's enemy.

JP: As Pastor Cameron talked about the need to have this sort of prophetic imagination to be able to see things through God's eyes even when we're here in this broken world, we talked a little bit more about how the things that happen, even things that seem bad, even people that seem bad, even rulers that seem bad, can be used by God to forward his own providential purposes.

CM: When God says to Isaiah, "Cyrus, a servant." The people of Judah would have gone "hang on a second, Cyrus is the enemy and God's going, 'no, he's my servant.'" I'm using these people to do this so you never...

God's on God's side. Full stop. We want to put people on sides and we want to decide whose side God is on. That old hymn we used to sing, "who is on the Lord's side, who will face the foe." It's an old Christian hymn, but lots of militaristic language, the idea that we're on God's side. I get the spirit of it, and there are probably some good things in there, but we do tend to do that.

We know whose side God is on, and we know who's not on God's side. And God's going "I'm on my own side. And I will decide what's happening." And so we need to pause and go, "am I enacting my own will? Am I actually enacting God's will, or am I, in doing this am I actually fighting God?" Another place you don't really want to be in your Christian life.

KW: Pastor Cyndy Warkentin is the EMC pastor of Saturday Night church in Landmark, Manitoba. We also spoke to her about this question: in our Mennonite and Anabaptist traditions and for many who hold to a position against violence, we believe that in the end God will make all things right in the world and this has been very important for our teachings about loving our enemies. What does this kind of perspective about eternity have to do with loving our enemies? This is what Pastor Cyndy had to say.

Cyndy Warkentin: Well, I think that we're living in the here and the not-yet Kingdom of God. Because I think that's what Scripture teaches, that we're praying "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And if we believe that, then we are already here, now, living hard, leaning hard into Kingdom life and the way that it's going to look once all creation is actually restored to its original glory.

We know about Kingdom living because we know how Jesus lived and taught. We know what we're supposed to do, and he said and modelled, "love your enemies." And so I think that restored creation is going to be unified in the peace and love of God. And so we're supposed to all be living into that. We know that in heaven there isn't going to be strife and there's not going to be war and there's not going to be anger and hate and killing, and so we're supposed to already be modelling that now, at this time, in our lives. And so how we're living now matters in the light of eternity because of that.

Jesus was the prince of peace. His role is to bring peace on earth as the angels announced to the shepherds when he was born. And I don't think that hating people and being in conflict with them is what God intends for his followers, and you certainly don't draw people to Jesus by taking up arms against them. I wonder if the very act of participating in war could be used as a condemnation of people to a Christless eternity. Jesus preached and he lived peace right through to his crucifixion when he could have called the legion of angels to come to his rescue and he didn't. His love and humility is what draws people to him. And together with his spirit, is what we are called to live into in the here and now in anticipation of that eternity with God. And so there's not room for armed conflict in that as far as I can see.

KW: In Pastor Cameron's response about this whole conversation around eschatology and what it has to do with loving our enemies, I so appreciated what he said about how God is on God's side and how we need to remember this. And he brought us back to this story in scripture about how God used even non-Israelite kings and he calls them his servant, and how this was kind of shocking to the people of Israel.

This reminded me of actually another time when I was listening to Pastor Cameron, at the time, we just called him Cameron, he was our professor at Providence University College. He would start our classes off with a meditation from Scripture, and this particular day he was talking about a passage from Joshua 5 and I'll never forget it. He was reading Joshua 5, starting in verse 13,

When Joshua was near the town of Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with sword in hand. Joshua went up to him and demanded, "Are you friend or foe?" "Neither one," he replied. "I am the commander of the Lord's army." At this, Joshua fell with his face to the ground in reverence. "I am at your command," Joshua said. "What do you want your servant to do?" [NLT]

And then the angel of the Lord goes on to give instructions to Joshua about what they were going to do. But Joshua comes to him and he wants to put him in these boxes. Are you on my side or are you on the side of my enemy? And the angel says, "I am on God's side." And like Cameron said, God is on God's side. Full stop. And even in this context, God is about to lead Israel into battle. In the Battle of Jericho, you know this famous battle, and God reminds Joshua right as they're entering the promised land, right as they're about to be led into battle by God himself, and God is reminding them, "no, no, no, no, no, no. This isn't about you and your enemies." This is about God. This is about God being on his own side and that they're not supposed to get it into their heads to create their own sides and their own enemies, but that this is about them being on God's side in the first place.

I think we so often get this mixed up and confused and that's kind of where we need to remember this right at the beginning of everything, before we take action or before we formulate any of our plans. First, we are on God's side and remember that he's got a plan for this world and that's where this whole thing about eschatology comes in. God's got a plan for this world and are we taking part in God's plan or are we just making our own boxes and our own sides? Because God's on God's side and he's got a plan, and that's what this end times thing is all about. And are we taking part in that redemptive plan for the world, or are we doing something else?

JP: Right. I think another way that those sort of either-or categories that we like to put things in gets shattered is exactly what Pastor Cyndy brings up, which is the sort of the now and the not yet. Has God defeated sin and death and brought us into a new kingdom and a new life? Yes, but do those powers of sin and darkness still have some control over us? And are we living in a world that remains broken and imperfect and twisted and

distorted by sin? Yes, both of these things are true at the same time, and we live in this intersection where God has won the battle. Jesus has died and defeated the powers of sin and darkness and risen as a victor over all these things, and yet that victory hasn't been fully realized, in that we can look around us and still see brokenness. So in so many ways, an understanding of what God has done, is doing, and will do in the future, forces us to step outside of simple yes or no answers, simple your side/our side thinking, and forces us to be imaginative about trying to understand things from God's point of view.

We talked with Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld, Professor Emeritus of Religious and Theological Studies at Conrad Grebel University College. He's the author of *Killing Enmity*, and he's also the chair of the Faith and Life Commission of the Mennonite World Conference. This is what Dr. Yoder Neufeld had to say about this same question of how our understanding of the end times, changes is how we think about peace now in the present.

Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld: Let me make a few comments here and then see whether I can pull it together.

One is the whole New Testament was written by folks who saw themselves as living at the end of days. The resurrection of Jesus was, in a sense, the starting gun to the wrapping up of this broken age, or this broken world. So people lived with a strong, keen sense of what we sometimes talk about the second coming or the return, or the full revealing of Christ when God will hand over the Kingdom, having defeated all the powers as First Corinthians 15 puts it. So you live with a very keen sense "we're on the cusp of God's acting."

Well, here we are a couple of thousand years later, we're still grappling with this and in some respects there have been moments in the history, including, for instance, during the time of Anabaptist beginnings. They weren't the only ones, but they certainly live with a sense of being at the end of days. That's true for Luther. It's true for the other reformers. There are many Mennonite groups along the way who have been sort of taken with this expectation to very high degree, repeatedly in history, including today. That can lead very quickly to "our job is to wait, to hang in there." The Book of Revelation - enduring, right, you endure, you put up with, because God will act.

I think there is much to be said for that trust in God, in God's acting rather than to think it depends on us to fix the world. That can also, however, lead to a kind of abandonment of agency on our part, and then it can also lead to a kind of "it doesn't really matter a whole lot what we do other than make sure our ticket is still valid for when that all happens and we can go to heaven." So people often say, "well, if you believe in Jesus, then you'll go to heaven." Then you're part of that story, and that can often then lead to a situation in which we can participate in the world as it is, with abandon - economically, socially or in terms of the vast majority of Christians in terms of military activity, etcetera. So we

behave as if we're not really part of the Kingdom. That's, I think, been a danger around this end of days kind of impact on us.

I think it's important to realize how often the New Testament in a sense subverts or undoes that. I think of Jesus in Luke 17. "Don't look here. Don't look there." i.e. Where, when, what are the signs of the Kingdom coming? The Kingdom of God is in your midst, it's squishing up between your toes. That means that what we're waiting for is here, now, so seek first the Kingdom and its justice and its peculiar form of divine logic, which is a restorative justice. Seek that. Leave the question - God knows, only God knows. No one else is privy to the decision about how to finally bring about a new heaven and new earth. In Jesus' is thinking, you are a kind of colony of the future in the present. Well, how do you live as a colony of the future unless you live that future already? Okay, so it invests the present with the promise of the future in terms of how we actually live. I think that informs our peace stance, our attitudes to violence, et cetera.

I think it's really telling, you know, I mentioned Ephesians 6 and the armour of God. Paul actually uses that image in his very first letter already in First Thessalonians 5, which is really interesting because there it's all about people who are worried. When is Christ coming? Are we going to miss out on this? The day of the Lord is coming like a thief in the night, you don't know when. So what are you to do? You are to put on the helmet and the breastplate, which is like God as warrior invading to finally fix this whole thing. But you're to put on that armour. And what does the helmet and the breastplate represent? Faith, hope and love. Isn't that fascinating?

So Paul thinks that don't worry, you won't miss. But in the meantime, you act as if you are the appearing of the day of the Lord. You behave as if you are already the future invading the present. I love your question Kevin, because I think it sort of puts it into a larger framework that says when we're talking about nonviolence or we're talking about loving enemies, this is activity of in a sense, participating in bringing the future of God into the present. It participates in the remaking of creation, which is why in Matthew 5 the image of loving God is the one who shines the sun and who that makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust, that's creation activity. So loving the enemies is participating in the new creation, you might say. I don't know whether that answers your question, but it's a very perplexing one. The one thing I would just want to emphasize: we dare not let our hope in Christ's full appearing and God's fixing creation in a final way, undo our own passion and energy to see justice and peace and love take hold in the lives of people.

KW: Dr. Greg Boyd is the pastor at Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, MN. He is also the author of numerous books including the Crucifixion of the Warrior God. This is what Dr. Boyd had to say about this question about the end times and what it has to do with loving our enemies.

Dr. Greg Boyd: It has everything to do with it. The reason why there's a strong pull on all human beings in this fallen world to self-preservation and it's part of our fallen instinct. The call to live in love, including loving your enemies, means you've got to crucify that fallen impulse to self-preservation. Now if you believe that this world is all you got, this lifetime is all you have. Or maybe you believe in the afterlife, but it's not really real to you. You don't think about it very much and say, "Okay, I think that life goes on," but that's not real to you. What is real to you is that this could be your only life right here and now and if that's your conviction, then you're going to do all you can to preserve it. Losing your life is the ultimate loss if in fact this life is all you have. At least that feels to be true, because you're not really thinking very much about life after this epic - the eternal life in the future.

But in the New Testament it gives us this glorious picture of God redeeming all the things through the cross. God's reconciling everything in heaven and on earth by means of the cross. Colossians 1:19-20. Paul tells us that the sufferings of this present age - even if you get tortured to death - the sufferings of this present age can't be compared to the glory which God has in store for those who love him. Now, if a person has faith in that - faith is about a vision, faith is the substance of things hoped for, it's when you envision something as a concrete reality cause you anticipate to be true and the more you anticipate it to be true, the more it feels true to us. So the more real the afterlife, the glorious Kingdom that God has in store for us, the more real that is, the more I'm willing to sacrifice this life, and that is the attitude of the New Testament.

They don't cling to their life. The fact that they don't clean their life is their victory. Revelation tells us that they overcome, not through force, not through violence, not through self preservation, but by not clinging to their life and being willing to lay down their lives and by the word of their testimony. And that's their victory. And so we're to live with this.

I think every Christian should be very intentional on making sure they're living in an eternal narrative. This world is the incubation period to be birthed in the Kingdom of God and the sufferings that we go through here are the birth pains; Jesus refers to this as birth pains. That cause it's going to give birth to this new thing, this glorious kingdom where God's love is going to define every square inch and everything is contrary to love is going to be burned away. That's what the final judgment is all about, because nothing contrary to love can enter into the kingdom. And to a degree that that's real to me, only love... Love is the only thing we take with us. If I believe that then when I'm faced with a situation where it's either my life or the life of this guy pointing a gun at me, well, I'm going to choose me. I will lose. Go ahead and shoot me.

I think to follow Jesus, you have to come to the point of saying I'd rather die than kill anyone. Because that's what's loving to do and loves the only thing you take with us. And so, but you only do that if you are convinced that love wins, that love is victorious. That

love is eternal. Nothing else is. Love is eternal, and so invest everything in love cause that's the one thing you got. Everything else is gonna get burned away. If I shoot that guy? Well, that part of me that did that's got to be burned away and so it's better for me to crucify it now. We're getting fit for the Kingdom.

JP: Dr. Boyd talked about how our understanding of the future can begin to form us in the present by looking at Jesus.

GB: You see this? With the life of Jesus as well, the author of Hebrews says, “for the joy that was set before him, he endured the sufferings of the cross,” and so Jesus had a vision that gave him joy. Now the cross, being crucified, and especially for him to be experiencing the separation from the Father as he's bearing the sin of the world that had to be the most horrendously horrendous thing imaginable for the son of God. But for the joy that was set before him he was willing to endure the shame of the cross and the sufferings of the cross because he saw what was accomplished and he saw the good it would do for creation and all the people that it would save. And he loves the creation and he loves all the people and so it gives him joy to see the redemption. And that's what motivates him to say I will endure anything if it's going to produce that. Well, that's the mindset that we're supposed to have. There's a great joy that lies ahead of us, but there's suffering on the way to getting there and we've got to be willing to embrace that suffering for the joy that's set before us.

JP: We also talked about the attitude of many New Testament writers, including Paul, and how they held their lives with fairly open hands. Paul, of course, says to live is Christ and to die is gain in Philippians. Dr. Boyd expands on this.

GB: And that's the attitude that they have in the New Testament. They really hold lightly to this life. Now they don't devalue this life, this life is important with the Kingdom being here and now so they're not like, “forget about the earth because it's like rearranging furniture on the Titanic or anything like that.” They care about the here and now and about justice here and now, and living up the kingdom here and now. But they don't cling to their own life here and now. They're willing to lay that down if doing that is going to further the cause of love; God's purpose in the world.

JP: I love this topic. This is something that for me has been an episode that I've been looking forward to since the beginning. Conversation topic I've been looking forward to since the beginning. Growing up I think I had sort of a foggy understanding of the end of all things and how things were going to play out. Most of it was kind of doom and gloom and sort of reading Revelation far too young and trying to sort of piece together what this could all mean. And growing up in a time when there was lots of discussion about what are all these things and what do these heads mean and what could these scorpions be and what are all of these seals and what are the signs we should be watching for.

But in the last years, my own theology around the end of all things, around eschatology has reshaped dramatically, I think, not actually in the particulars of what my theological beliefs are, but on the emphasis of it. That the emphasis of this is that God is in control, that he is good, that Jesus has won of victory, and it's going to be fully realized and it's going to be realized in the redemption of all creation and the bringing back of the world and the bringing back of his children to the way we were always intended to be in a sort of garden of Eden reflection as we go back to a garden with God and spend time in that intimate relationship. And as we sort of dig into that and as our panelists have talked about today, when we understand the redemptive arc of Scripture, the redemptive arc of God's journey through human history, and when we look forward to what he will be doing, it does change the way that we think about these things in the present, I think, in a meaningful way.

KW: It's one of those things where it's also something that gives me a tremendous hope, but it's also something that leaves me with what I might call a holy discontent, because in the world that we find ourselves in there's so much brokenness and so much messiness and so much pain and suffering and sorrows, it's clearly not the type of Eden that we read about in Genesis. And it's clearly not a heavenly place that we, you know, are hoping to go to. But we know that God is taking us somewhere and that God is going to be redeeming all of creation and redeeming the world. That we are going somewhere good. And so even though right now things in the world may not be all good, you know, and that's where that kind of holy discontent comes. It's like when you're travelling and you're not in your own bed, you know you're not at home, and that's okay, you're looking forward to getting back at home, back to your own bed, back to your family. It's kind of like that. This world is not our home exactly as it is, yet it is still something God created good. And there are things in it that are broken, but God will make those things right in the end and we are following God into that future. And the only way we can do that is by following his ways into that future, not our own.

JP: Right there is a quote by I think it was Martin Luther. Can I quote Martin Luther on an Anabaptist podcast?

KW: Go for it.

JP: I think it was Luther, I'm going, you can correct me if I'm wrong on this. He was asked if the world was going to end tomorrow, what would he do? How would that change his life? And he said what he would do is he would plant a tree. And there's this beautiful sense of recognizing that in the face of desolation and destruction and in the face of uncertainty and in the face of brokenness and recognizing that things are not as they should be, that we can be spiritual tree planters in the way that we live our lives, thinking about a greater future that God has planned for us.

KW: Our feature song today is by Red Mountain Church and it's called Weary of Earth, Myself and Sin. And it's a song that's just about looking forward, about when we feel sometimes weary in these broken times in these difficult days, how Jesus has a plan. Jesus has a future for us and sometimes that is what we are looking forward to even though right now might not be all that joyful. Weary of Earth, Myself and Sin by Red Mountain Church.

Weary of Earth, Myself and Sin; Red Mountain Church

Weary of earth, myself and sin,
Dear Jesus set me free,
And to Thy glory take me in,
For there I long to be.

Let a poor laborer here below,
When from his toil set free;
To rest and peace eternal go;
For there I long to be.

Burdened, dejected and oppressed,
Ah! Whither shall I flee,
But to Thy arms for peace and rest?
For there I long to be.

Empty, polluted, dark and vain,
Is all this world to me;
May I the better world obtain;
For there I long to be.

Weary of earth, myself and sin.

Closing

The Armchair Anabaptist is a Theodidaktos podcast and Theodidaktos is a publication of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference.

You can check us out online at www.thearmchairanabaptist.ca and find us on iTunes, Spotify, and wherever podcasts are found.

A special thanks to our guests who have joined us today, that was Dr. Greg Boyd, Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld and Pastor Cameron McKenzie, as well as Pastor Cyndy Warkentin.

Our intro song is First Communion by Dane Joneshill. Our feature song today was the song Weary of Earth, Myself and Sin by Red Mountain music.

Our executive producer is Erica Fehr, our producer and audio engineer is Kevin Wiebe and our administrative assistant and wizard of all things web related is Ruth Block.

I'm Kevin Wiebe, and I'm Jesse Penner and we have been your hosts for The Armchair Anabaptist. We certainly hope that what you have heard today will do more than stay is merely food for thought, but that it can help inspire each of us to get up out of the comfort of our armchairs and translate into living more like Jesus.

Join us next time as we continue our journey looking into the life of peace and digging into what loving our enemies is not. We are diving into the ways we can sometimes go wrong as we seek to live this out. That's next time on The Armchair Anabaptist.

*Edited for clarity