

# The importance of eschatology

## Preface

There are four key forms of eschatology:

- **AMILLENNIALISM:** this denies any form of millennium or thousand-year golden age. The symbolic references to a thousand years in Revelation 20 refer to the age of the Gospel, from the cross to the end.
- **HISTORIC PREMILLENNIALISM:** the original premillennialism from ancient times. Belief in a 1,000-year reign of Christ on the Earth before the end. The church goes through the tribulation.
- **POSTMILLENNIALISM:** Jesus returns after a millennium golden age where the church is triumphant and the Earth subdued. There are various forms of this triumphalism.<sup>1</sup> Today most are Charismatic with super-apostles and prophets ruling the world (Latter Rain doctrine).
- **DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM** (or Dispensationalism). There are several forms of this but historically the chief form has been a Pre-tribulational Dispensationalism – there is a secret rapture of the saints before a great tribulation on the Earth.<sup>2</sup>

This writer affirms the truth of Amillennialism.

Simple Biblical facts that are problematic for the other systems:

- The end comes immediately after Christ returns in glory to the Earth. There is no Scriptural mention of a thousand-year gap.
- There is no apostolic teaching of a millennium anywhere; this is very odd for such an important doctrine.
- When Christ returns he comes in kingly power and heavenly glory, no man can stand in his presence. All men die to be raised in a general resurrection unto judgment. The idea of the glorious Lord reigning over a world full of sin and sinners is preposterous.
- There is no mention anywhere of a secret rapture of the saints. There is no doctrinal teaching on this.
- Scripture clearly teaches that the church suffers in the tribulation of the end; a worldwide persecution of the saints.
- There is a falling away (apostasy) at the end and a great delusion.

This is a simple summary; there are many more arguments. All forms of Christian eschatology fall into one or another of these broad categories.

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<sup>1</sup> 1) A historic form whereby the church becomes globally successful and civilisation improves; a few Puritans held this optimistic view. 2) A Jewish legal form whereby the literal Law of Moses is re-introduced to rule the world (Theonomy or Reconstructionism); a minority of Reformed folk hold this. 3) Modern Charismatic triumphalism.

<sup>2</sup> There is: Classical Dispensationalism (Pre-Tribulationalism), with variants: Mid-Tribulationalism and Post-Tribulationalism; Progressive Dispensationalism; Neo-Dispensationalism; Hyper Dispensationalism (the church begins in Acts 13) and Ultra Dispensationalism (or Bullingerism: the church begins in Acts 28; most of the NT is Jewish).

## Introduction

Eschatology has been an unnecessarily divisive locus of doctrine. On the one hand, certain denominations in various time periods focused almost exclusively on eschatology and especially the interpretation of OT prophecy. This occurred, for example, in the decades after 1820. On the other hand, many Reformed churches were concerned by this over-emphasis; but this led to a neglect of eschatology. In fact some churches forbade any speculative study at all on end times issues. Sadly, both Martin Luther and John Calvin refused to write any commentary on Revelation because it was mysterious to them.

Of course both extremes are wrong and eschatology must be studied as much as any other locus of divinity because it is a subject in the Bible that must be taught. In fact, eschatology is important because it chiefly centres on the completion, fulfilment and consummation of God's decree. Eschatology explains to us the fulfilment of the divine plan and the glorious consummation and victory of the kingdom of Christ. To neglect this is a grave error.

In addition it is a frequently mentioned aspect of the NT. Scholars have posited that end times issues<sup>3</sup> are mentioned every 28 verses of the NT. What is certain is that eschatology features very strongly in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. The synoptic Gospels contain almost entire chapters on the matter while the last book of the NT is wholly devoted to it.

Here are some reasons why studying eschatology is important.

### The consummation of God's decree

Everything culminates in God's decree; his eternal counsel, plan and purpose. All of our life is centred in our part to play in the decree.

From our point of view, salvation is the central aspect of the decree but from God's point of view the important factor is the culmination of the whole plan and the beginning of a new age where heaven and Earth meet and God dwells with men. In both cases the consummation is with the Second Coming of Christ. This finalises salvation and initiates God's final purpose and the New Earth.

In a sense everything in creation, providence and salvation (the components of the decree) is focused upon the Second Coming. The creation longs for the return of the Lord and the revelation of God's children: 'For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God' (Rm 8:19). The elect long for the appearing of the Lord because then salvation is complete and we are made like Christ physically and inwardly. 'Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure' (1 Jn 3:2-3).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 'End times' (or 'last days', Heb 1:2) is a loose term. In one sense the end times is the period after the cross (or 'last hour', 1 Jn 2:18; or 'last times', 1 Pt 2:20). However, the phrase is also used for the times preceding the end (or 'last days', 2 Tim 3:1 / 2 Pt 3:3; or 'last time', 1 Pt 1:5 / Jude 1:18).

<sup>4</sup> At this time our spirit has been regenerated and the new nature implanted. However, our soul is in the process of being sanctified and our bodies require complete transformation. At the appearing of Christ our

The work of the Holy Spirit in applying salvation and all of God's purpose in Christ is geared towards the revelation of Christ in glory. That is the end he is working towards. His job is to glorify Christ and that task reaches its completion in the revealing of Christ in glory in the Parousia.<sup>5</sup> This is why those apostles who were full of the Spirit sometimes spoke in terms of the end being near;<sup>6</sup> in the Spirit they saw the completion that he was working towards as if it had already occurred. The more they were full of the Spirit, the more they saw the completion of all things. Fulness enhanced the perception of glory.

## The revelation of the glory of Christ

Jesus is currently sitting on the throne of glory with the Father in heaven. His power, authority and rule is absolute and awesome, but it is currently only seen by elect angels and the souls of dead saints (Rev 5:11, 7:11).

The whole universe is upheld by the word of his power; even atoms cohere together because the Lord tells them to.<sup>7</sup> The power and glory of Jesus is immense and indescribable.

When Jesus returns he comes in his glory and power. Jesus does not return in the manner of his incarnation; he is now the glorified and anointed king of the universe. Jesus comes in awesome power and glory.

This is a mistake made by many teaching a false eschatology. They picture Jesus returning as king but as a man. Not only that but a man ruling over a wicked world and evil people. This is impossible. The glorified Lord comes in glory and this glory consumes and destroys all traces of wickedness. When Jesus returns all wicked people are immediately destroyed (only to be resurrected to face judgment). Sin cannot stand in the presence of a holy God. In fact polluted nature, creation tainted by sin, cannot remain when Jesus returns and this is why the Earth is burned up to be restored in perfection.

The fact of the glory of Jesus is a vital component of eschatology and something that is downplayed by many teachers. When he returns he is marvelled at by the saints.

When He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed. 2 Thess 1:10 NKJV

To be marvelled at in all them that believed. ASV

To be marvelled at among all who have believed. NASB

To be marvelled at in all who have believed. RSV

Wondered at in all that have believed. Darby

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bodies are immediately transformed into a spiritual yet material body and our souls are fully sanctified. The whole person is then glorified.

<sup>5</sup> A theological term for the Second Coming. In Greek it means, 'being present'.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. 'the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers', (1 Pt 4:7). 'Little children, it is the last hour', (1 Jn 2:18). 'Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!' (Jm 5:9). 'The Lord is at hand', (Phil 4:5). 'But this I say, brethren, the time is short', (1 Cor 7:29).

<sup>7</sup> Col 1:17, 'He is before all things, and in Him all things consist'. 'Consist' is *sunistemi* meaning: to place together, to hold together, to set in the same place, to bring or band together, to put together by way of composition or combination, to have existence.

And will be a cause of wonder in all those who had faith. BBE

To be wondered at in all those believing. Young's Literal

'Admired' is far too weak a translation here (KJV, NKJV, WEB, RWB); *thaumazo* means: marvelled, to be astonished, to wonder at; as expressing human response when confronted by divine revelation in some form. The saints are prepared for the Lord's return and, having worshipped him for years, they understand something of his glory. Yet even they are astonished when he comes in the clouds. The saints are mesmerised, astonished and amazed by the glorious appearing of Jesus.

The rest of the world, however, is far from astonished in a good way. Sinners are terrified, shocked, dumbstruck and horrified as the truth dawns on them that Jesus is God. To them he returns in divine wrath, anger and judgment. They are destroyed.

When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power. 2 Thess 1:7-9

The return of Christ is the consummation of his testimony to men that he is God. The appearing of the Lord in glory and honour is the highpoint and goal of the decree. With this revelation God's purpose can finally be completed. Saints can be transformed and sinners judged and sentenced; creation is restored; heaven and Earth combine.

## The fulfilment of Bible prophecies

The Day of the Lord features heavily in the prophets and many prophets give data on events in the times preceding the Lord's return. In fact the phrase 'Day of the Lord' appears in 24 verses in the Bible. This is interesting. 24 is 12 x 2. 12 is the number of covenant and 2 is the number of witness. The Day of the Lord is the testimony of God and the fulfilment of his covenant with man.

Over and over again the prophets speak out about the end of days and the fulfilment of God's purposes. This is a subject that cannot be ignored if we are Bible students.

The Day of the Lord comes with destruction (Isa 13:6; Joel 1:15) and with divine wrath (Isa 13:9). It is a day of judgment (Jer 46:10); a great and terrible day (Joel 1:11). It comes with heavenly signs (Joel 2:31); a day of darkness (Amos 5:18, 20); it involves noise (Zeph 1:14). It is great and dreadful (Mal 4:5).

The NT is no less evocative. The Day of the Lord is great and awesome (Acts 2:20). It takes the world by surprise (1 Thess 5:2). It is not only unexpected but, 'the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up' (2 Peter 3:10).

In short, the Day of the Lord is the end of all things; the end of all life on this planet. It is the destruction of all sinners, the salvation of all saints and the burning and purifying of the world in preparation for the restoration of creation in perfection.

The prophecies give us ample information to understand exactly what is going on in the events preceding the end and what actually happens at the end. This is information the world has always sought but does not wish to believe. This alone is good reason to study this topic.

## Learning how to interpret the book of Revelation

There are several approaches to interpreting Revelation which are based on a certain prior eschatology. Yet there is only one approach that ensures one has a foundation for understanding it properly. The book actually tells you to be careful in your approach (Rev 13:18, 17:9). There is only one interpretation and that is the one that God directed. Tolerating multiple interpretations of Revelation is folly; we need to have God's interpretation that is inwardly consistent.

In very brief terms, these are the main ways of interpreting Revelation:

- **Preterist:** The prophecies were fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem and the fall of heathen Rome. It only affects the early church. Problem: Revelation claims to be a prophecy (1:3; 4:1; 22:7; 10, 18, 19). The Second Coming is described and this has not yet occurred. E.g. liberal teachers.
- **Historicist:** The prophecies are predictive of progressive history from the cross up to today, being partly fulfilled, partly unfulfilled. The visions are sequential. It symbolically teaches the Fall of Rome (the seals), the rise of the Roman Catholic Church, the rise of Islam (locusts), the French Revolution etc. It depicts the Antichrist as the pope. Problem: this does great injustice to many symbols, especially the Antichrist. Tends towards a rationalist approach failing to see the spiritual application. It ignores the matter of time constraints within the book (e.g. 11:2, 12:6, 14). Most importantly, it makes the book useless to those it was originally written for by John. Many historicist interpreters vary greatly from one another on details; there is no universal agreement. E.g. the Reformers, many older commentaries, AJ Gordon, AB Simpson.
- **Idealist:** The book is a summary of the continual war between God and Satan, or Christianity with paganism. There are no historical claims or predictions, just a picture of spiritual truth. Problem: this ignores the prophetic nature of the book, which is clearly described and explicitly stated. It diminishes the book's value to real people in history.
- **Futurist:** Only the first three chapters relate to the present time or the time of John; from 4:1 it refers to the Great Tribulation onwards; chapters 6-22 have reference to the absolute future of the Lord's Appearing (6-19), a supposed Millennium (20) and the eternal state (21-22). This uses a strong literal interpretation. Problem: This is the mainstream Dispensational view, mostly Pre-Tribulationist. If Rev 20:1-4 does not teach a future millennium (which it does not) then this view is false. This divests the bulk of the book, and the warnings in it, of any value to believers prior to the end. E.g. JA Seiss, CI Schofield, AC Gaebeli, John MacArthur, HA Ironside etc. There is also a more extreme form of this where even the first three chapters are a prophecy about the future Second Coming - being a prediction of the condition of the Jews after the first Resurrection; or they represent church periods throughout history. [E.g. many Brethren authors like W Kelly.] Problem: This is extreme Dispensationalism and Pre-Tribulationism. The problems of Simple Futurism apply equally.
- **Spiritual:** the book has to be understood in a spiritual manner. This means correctly understanding the symbols and typology used as well as the parallel structures of themes of the book. The book centres on the warfare between God and Satan and how

this pans out throughout history climaxing in the end times. Half of the book pictures this from the human perspective, half from heaven's perspective. After the introduction and warnings to the churches, the visions are parallel statements of God's judgments from different perspectives.

Clearly, the only way to properly understand Revelation is by an amillennial eschatology centred on a spiritual interpretation. Straying from this one goes hopelessly awry.

For example, it is easy to show that Dispensationalism, in all its forms, is false by showing that key constructs are erroneous. For example:

- There is no mention of a secret rapture anywhere in the Bible. There are no texts teaching it and no doctrinal statement by the apostles on it.
- There is no apostolic teaching on a millennium golden age before the end of the world; not a shred of teaching. Such an important subject requires apostolic doctrinal instruction, not just some vague, false interpretation of a symbolic passage in Revelation 20.
- There is one people of God not two. God's focus is on the church not Jews. Saved Jews become part of the church.
- The apostolic teaching on the return of Christ shows that it is singular, glorious, earth-shattering and very loud with the presence of angels and great glory.

In a similar way we can discount Historic Premillennialism and Post-Millennialism. Throughout most of church history, sound theologians have mostly been amillennial.<sup>8</sup>

## **Resolving confusion caused by false systems**

There are a number of false systems of eschatology. Some of these actively damage one's entire theological system; following certain eschatological systems leads to a false view of God and his decree. It is, therefore, vital to understand what is at stake to stop one's whole doctrinal foundation being compromised.

Often church leaders will say that following a novel eschatology is irrelevant as long as you commit to their church or a church standard. This is folly; it is very relevant. This shows very poor judgment.

Some false systems not only lead to doctrinal confusion and false data on the end but even determine political views that affect geo-political constructs.

The clearest example of this is Dispensationalism, which has directly led (as it was intended from the start) to lead to favouring Jews and political Israel. The predominance of Dispensational eschatology in America directly led to the emergence of heretical marginal theological systems favouring Jews in general (such as Christian Zionism, Messianic Christianity and Jewish Roots), but it also led to the political favouring of the State of Israel despite its huge sins and wickedness. Without Dispensationalism, the Christian Right and Moral Majority would not have enabled Jewish interests to gain such political power or for the State of Israel to be funded, supported and defended by American tax dollars, political will and military power. Without this Christian support for Israel,

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<sup>8</sup> Some unsound theologians have also been amillennial, such as Roman Catholics, but that is beside the point. Only a comparative few good men have been Historic Premillennial (including some early church fathers) and Postmillennial (including some Puritans). However, Dispensationalism is completely contrary to sound theology.

there would have been no Lebanon War, no Six-Day War, no Yom Kippur war, no Iraq war; no insurrection in Syria and none of the multiple acts of genocide and apartheid against the Palestinians.

All of this is enabled by the development of a novel theology created by Dispensational Premillennialism which is founded upon the belief that God has two peoples, the church and the Jews, and that the Jews are of prior importance. God is really centred on the Jews who are the focus of the kingdom and are the true people of God. By believing this, thousands of years of sound theology has been turned upside down and the US church became the whipping boy of Israel.

The tragic deceit in all this is that Dispensationalism started in a corrupt, immoral. Occultic, scandalous church movement in London (which had captivated and ruined Edward Irving), being based upon a mixture of Jesuit deception<sup>9</sup> and mystical ramblings (e.g. the secret rapture).<sup>10</sup> This was then plagiarised and adopted by the Brethren under John Darby, himself an elite player and member of the East India Company. It was then promoted heavily by the sponsorship of Jewish bankers (such as enabling multiple preaching tours of America by Darby) and followed by the heavy support given by elite Zionist bankers to CI Scofield, a wicked charlatan and criminal. Scofield's study Bible, paid for by Jewish bankers, became a best seller and the notes were chiefly responsible for the global promotion of Dispensational ideas, even when they were outright lies contradicting the very text they commented on.

So false eschatology not only creates doctrinal heresies (e.g. Christ ruling over an Earth full of sinners for 1,000 years) but also creates political ideologies that foster geo-political movements favouring an antichristian despotic system.

To overturn the sort of confusion caused by a wrong eschatology, one has to develop a true one. The truth does not lead to confusion; in fact confusion is a work of the enemy.<sup>11</sup> The more one understands the truth about the end, the more peace one has. In fact, Revelation is the only book that has the promise of a blessing if read.

## Conclusion

We should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ. 2 Tim 2:12-13

We are told to look to the clouds and expect the Lord's return (Rev 1:7) in a similar way to his ascension (Acts 1:9-11). We must watch for coming of the Son of Man (Matt 25:13). We should love his appearing (2 Tim 4:8) and look forward to it (2 Tim 2:13). We should be waiting for the adoption at Christ's return (Rm 8:23); waiting for the revelation of Christ in glory (1 Cor 1:7) when his enemies become his footstool (Heb 10:13).

Our pilgrimage on the Earth involves waiting for the revelation and appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ. The centre of our Gospel hope is that Christ will return and put everything

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<sup>9</sup> E.g. Lacunza.

<sup>10</sup> Initially prompted by the sick, mystical, unbalanced Margaret MacDonald.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Cor 14:33, 'For God is not the author of confusion but of peace'.

right. Thus a basic understanding of eschatology is absolutely vital to good discipleship. You cannot follow Christ and know nothing about his return.

Some people feel that eschatology is very complex and difficult to understand, but this is no excuse for ignorance. The doctrine of the Trinity is very hard to understand yet it is a cardinal doctrine that all believers must be aware of and accept. However, the basic principles of sound eschatology are not that difficult to understand; they just require a modicum of effort and a good teacher. There is no excuse for ignorance.

For example: to understand the basic facts about the return of the Lord and the events preceding it, list all the clear, doctrinal, apostolic teaching on this subject in the NT. Avoid apocalyptic and symbolic works at first (Revelation, Daniel, Zechariah) and avoid OT prophecies until you understand the basic structure of events from clear Scriptures. When you understand the basic facts from clear texts, only then consider more difficult passages. The problem with many false teachers is that they start to teach eschatology from obscure, OT prophecies, which they then misinterpret. Having developed a false system, they then try to force NT texts into that system.

Studying eschatology stimulates our hope and desire to see the Lord in Person in glory. It prompts us to worship and generates faith. How can saints fail to study the culmination of all God's plans? Eschatology is the end of theology; it is a subject that is vital to understand.

But eschatology is ultimately centred in a Person. It involves an expectation to see someone we love and worship. It is not some dry, technical doctrine to be studied with a calculator in one hand and a calendar in the other. It is a patient waiting and expectation centred on the Person of Christ. We want to know the circumstances of his appearing and be ready for his return.

Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Matt 24:44

Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming. Matt 25:13

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