

The Importance of Eschatology

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Apocalyptic symbols are not merely images to be pondered; they are also stimuli to action. Even the earliest apocalypses combined a literal sense of a divinely predetermined plan for history with an insistence on the necessity for choice within history.¹

The theological importance of eschatology

Eschatology helps to integrate and tie together our overall theology

The Bible tells a coherent, unfolding story from Genesis to Revelation. An important part of the biblical story is its consummation. Our eschatology exposes whether our theology as a whole is consistent or inconsistent with the rest of the biblical structure and story.

Sound eschatology is a source of hope and expectation

Most Christians, in most places, throughout most of history, have experienced hardship and persecution. That is still true today. Early Christians did not expect to avoid suffering but knew they were being purified by suffering. They could endure persecution and suffering because their eschatology told them that there will be a consummation of God's plan, and even the evil events of this world are part of that plan. It was their eschatology that enabled them to avoid despair when they saw evil rampant in their world and to endure and remain faithful when they suffered and were tempted to compromise. Having a sound eschatology enables modern believers to persevere with the same hope as the early disciples.

¹ McGinn, *Anti-Christ*, 278.

Sound eschatology strengthens the teaching ministry of the church

Second Tim 3:16-17 declares, “*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, [and] for training in righteousness.*” To not have a well-thought-out eschatology that is consistent with the rest of our theology means that much of the Bible will remain a mystery. However, to be able to teach and preach from all sections of the Bible, including the eschatological parts, will help produce well-grounded, well-rounded, deeper Christians.

Sound eschatology strengthens the life of the church

In many churches today, eschatology essentially is ignored. In other churches, and among various popular “prophecy experts,” eschatology is amazingly misunderstood and misused. James Edwards comments on the effects of this dual problem: “This unfortunate set of circumstances—both its abuse and its subsequent neglect—has weakened the church rather than strengthened it. If we dispense with eschatology, then the purpose and destiny of history fall into the hands of humanity alone. No one, I think, Christian or not, takes solace in that prospect.”²

On the other hand, sound eschatology “asserts that history is meaningful because it is directed toward an end, a goal that lies at its conclusion and gives meaning to the whole”³ It helps us see our situation in true perspective: see our enemies in their true light; see our redeemer and king in his true glory; and see ourselves in our true beauty.⁴ That enables Christians to live out their faith, act as God’s instruments to redeem people, and not allow things to remain as they are.

Eschatology, evangelism, and Christian social action: introduction

“The longing that things *ought not to be* as they are, and *cannot be allowed* to remain as they are, is essentially an eschatological longing.”⁵ Eschatology (although perhaps unacknowledged), therefore, is the source or basis of discontent with existence as it is. But eschatology is more than that: it is the stimulus to act on our discontent with existence as it is. Because eschatology, including apocalyptic books such as Revelation, has the two-fold nature of true biblical prophecy (i.e., oracles of judgment and oracles of salvation), by its very nature it demands a behavioral response on the part of its hearers.⁶ That necessarily affects how we are to live. Indeed, the language, images, and ideas

² Edwards, *Mark*, 402.

³ Grenz, *Millennial Maze*, 200.

⁴ Johnson, *Triumph*, 337-43.

⁵ Edwards, *Mark*, 402, emphasis in original.

⁶ Green, *How to Read*, 129-30; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 103, 129-30.

of eschatology have been powerful weapons across the centuries in the quest for justice and social change. Revelation has inspired hymns and art, has been the book of martyrs and visionaries, and has acted as a prophetic critique of the church, the state, and the culture.

At the heart of Christianity is its dual concern for winning converts (evangelism) and dealing with poverty, injustice, and bad social conditions (social activism)

We all know of, and many experience, the great and wonderful things that exist in this world. On the other hand, everyone knows of the radical nature of evil in the world that corrupts everything, both material and immaterial. For Christians, the eschatological discontent expressed above by James Edwards entails certain obligations. Christians are not merely to bemoan what is wrong with the world. Rather, because they have been given a new heart (Ezek 36:26), the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16), the Holy Spirit (John 14:17; Rom 8:1-17), and the word of God (e.g., Luke 8:11, 15, 21), they are now God's agents of change in and for the world. The hope that our eschatology brings necessarily translates into practical involvement with the world, i.e., dealing with poverty, injustice, and bad social conditions. That demonstrates the reality of our faith which, in turn, facilitates evangelism.⁷

The power of eschatological rhetoric as a motivator for social change

All cultures mold their subjects into their own image. On the other hand, Richard Bauckham points out that eschatology, particularly a book like Revelation, "offers a different way of perceiving the world which leads people . . . to challenge the effects of the dominant ideology."⁸ Indeed, throughout history, eschatological language and ideas often have proven to be powerful tools for analyzing events and motivating action.

For example, during the Reformation, Protestants frequently drew on the concept of the Antichrist in contrasting "the 'anti-Christlike' behavior of the pope and the biblical ministry of Jesus."⁹ In another example, in 1915 John Chilembwe led an insurrection against the injustices of the British colonial system in what is now the nation of Malawi. Chilembwe himself was a Baptist minister. Philip Jenkins writes, "Almost certainly he was drawing heavily on Baptist apocalyptic ideas."¹⁰ The power of eschatological ideas is not limited to theological or political

⁷ See Green, *How to Read*, 131-34.

⁸ Bauckham, *Theology*, 159. Elsewhere Bauckham states, "Those who imagine early Christianity as a quietist and apolitical movement should study the book of Revelation." Bauckham, *Bible in Politics*, 101.

⁹ Ozment, *Protestants*, 48.

¹⁰ Jenkins, "Chilembwe's rising," 45. The revolt was crushed but "left behind a legacy of nationalist and Africanist sentiment. Chilembwe today is Malawi's greatest national hero. His face appears on Malawi's currency, and every January 15 the nation celebrates John Chilembwe Day." *Ibid.*

rebellions. Lord Shaftesbury was a great English social reformer in the nineteenth century. Near the end of his life he said, "I do not think that in the last forty years I have ever lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by the thought of our Lord's return."¹¹ In other words, eschatology, including the expectation of meeting the Lord face to face, was one of the strongest motivators behind Shaftesbury's social reforms.

In America, eschatological ideas have proven to be important in many ways. Roger Williams founded the state of Rhode Island and was a pioneer of religious toleration and rights for native Americans. Bernard McGinn notes that "it is often forgotten that he arrived at these forward-looking views on the basis of a deeply apocalyptic theology of history."¹² Puritan ministers such as John Cotton expounded the book of Revelation and tied it to the mission of the colonists in New England to "add incentive and urgency to New England's special mission."¹³ Harry Stout observes that "millennial speculations and predictions . . . played a supporting role in arousing public support for [the French and Indian War of 1754-1763]."¹⁴ Stout adds that, with the onset of the American Revolution in 1775, millennial rhetoric "played a vital role in affirming that the struggle was more than a constitutional dispute; it was part of a foreordained plan to establish a new order for the ages that would prevision, in civil and religious forms, the shape God's millennial kingdom would eventually assume in the fullness of time."¹⁵

In the Civil War (1861-1865), African Americans in particular "expressed concrete millennial hopes for the war. The Day of Jubilee seemed so dramatic an expectation that [they] developed premillennial visions, seeing their freedom perhaps as the beginning of a new kingdom brought on [by the war]."¹⁶ Perhaps America's most popular song of that era, and most important battle song, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," is saturated with Scripture and eschatology. The eschatology of the book of Revelation has similarly influenced contemporary American social critics. For example, "In his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King, Jr., echoes the language and images of Revelation when interpreting experiences and hopes in the struggle for the civil rights of African-Americans."¹⁷

¹¹ Boice, *Foundations*, 456.

¹² McGinn, *Anti-Christ*, 239.

¹³ Stout, *New England Soul*, 48-49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 307.

¹⁶ Wilson, "American Civil War," 399. Even the South saw the war in millennialistic terms, although the Southern version (at least the *white* Southern version, not that of the slaves) allowed for the slavery in the looked-for millennium. Chesebrough, *God Ordained*, 226-27.

¹⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 11.

The differences between the various eschatological views suggest that, to the extent that Christians act consistent with their beliefs, eschatology may affect evangelism, social action, and other practical aspects of Christian living

“Most human beings act from a complex tangle of motives, impulses, and values.”¹⁸ A person’s view of eschatology is *one* influence why someone acts the way he or she does. Travis mentions the logic of eschatology vis-à-vis social change: “to regard the kingdom as wholly future or a wholly other-worldly phenomenon normally leads to a conservative attitude towards social change, and to a narrow view of the church’s mission in terms of rescuing individuals out of a fallen world. By contrast, those who stress that the kingdom of God is already at work in the world are likely to argue for radical social change and for a view of mission which refuses to limit its scope to the spiritual deliverance of individuals out of the world into the safety of the church.”¹⁹ In fact, there are clear historical correlations between Christians’ eschatological views and how they live their lives, particularly with respect to evangelism and social action.

Eschatology, evangelism, and Christian social action: postmillennialism

Wayne Grudem summarizes postmillennialism’s basic outlook on history as follows: “The primary characteristic of postmillennialism is that it is very optimistic about the power of the gospel to change lives and bring about much good in the world.”²⁰ Kenneth Gentry states that the eschatological theme of the victory of the gospel “is most influential in promoting a full-orbed Christian witness and Bible-based social activism.”²¹ For example, the Puritans were mostly postmillennialists. Their eschatology affected their attitude toward their mission as they left Europe and settled in the “New World.” Avihu Zakai explains that the Puritans “confidently expected their own rigorous adherence to God’s Word would lead to the millennial rule of Christ, and, consequently, to the establishment in New England of the utopian New Jerusalem described in the Book of Revelation.”²²

Eschatological thinking continued to exert its influence in America long after the Puritans were gone. Stanley Grenz states, “Perhaps nowhere was this American Christian utopianism speaking the language of the Apocalypse more pronounced than in the antislavery movement. . . . When victory came, postmillennial optimism anticipated a new day for the nation. . . . But the victory over slavery did

¹⁸ Boyer, *When Time*, 302.

¹⁹ Travis, *I Believe*, 49-50.

²⁰ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1111. Today, most preterists are postmillennial in their eschatology and thus share the same essentially optimistic philosophy of history. Pate, “Introduction,” 23.

²¹ Gentry, *Dominion*, 16.

²² Zakai, “Theocracy in Massachusetts,” 23.

not result in the millennial era. Other evils remained in the land. As a result, the postmillennial spirit with its visions of a Christianized society fostered other reformist movements—women’s suffrage, temperance and even the social gospel.”²³

Eschatology, evangelism, and Christian social action: premillennialism

Premillennialism, especially dispensational premillennialism, has an almost opposite outlook on history compared to postmillennialism. It displays a basically pessimistic view concerning history and our role in its culmination.²⁴ In other words, all the efforts of Christians in the world will not lead to the reformation of society. Rather, Antichrist will arise. The kingdom will not come gradually through the church but will be inaugurated by the cataclysmic event of the second coming.

Paul Boyer observes the historical influence of dispensational premillennialism on social activism: “Logically, the premillennial outlook seemed to imply passivity, since society’s evils and injustices merely bore out the prophesied degeneracy and wickedness of the present age. And, indeed, from John Darby’s [dispensationalism’s originator in the 1830s] day on, a vast body of premillennialist writing warned against the lure of social activism. . . . Through the Depression and World War II, prophecy writers emphasized the uselessness of human efforts at social betterment: regardless of what governments and uplift organizations might do, war, suffering, and conflict were bound to grow worse.”²⁵ Several studies of dispensational premillennialism have shown that its view of society has significantly affected how its followers engage the world and its problems.²⁶ Richard Lovelace, for example, recounts that “[one] factor in the breakup of evangelical social concern was a monolithic shift in eschatology which occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Up to this point premillennial, postmillennial and amillennial evangelicals had been united in working and praying toward spiritual, cultural and social renewal. . . . The whole momentum of Dispensational theology moved toward a form of premillennialism which was evangelistically active but socially passive.”²⁷

Not all dispensationalist premillennialists, of course, are disengaged from society. However, their responses to the state of the world and society tend to be limited to the “religious” arena. Thus, “Like premillennialists in the past, [Hal] Lindsey’s purposes are overwhelmingly evangelistic and spiritual. . . . Lindsey advises his

²³ Grenz, *Millennial Maze*, 58.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

²⁵ Boyer, *When Time*, 298.

²⁶ The most comprehensive study of dispensationalism’s approach to evangelism, social activism, and political action, with an emphasis on the importance of the nation of Israel, is Timothy Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

²⁷ Lovelace, *Dynamics*, 376-77.

readers to submit to the Holy Spirit's direction in their lives, read the Bible regularly, and, in the knowledge that the rapture may occur at any moment, take the gospel to others before it is too late."²⁸ The emphasis is on personal piety. Individual dispensationalists may be as active in the social realm as postmillennialists, amillennialists, and historic premillennialists, but if they are so engaged, it is *in spite* of their eschatology rather than *because* of it.

Eschatology, evangelism, and Christian social action: amillennialism

Between postmillennial optimism and premillennial pessimism lies amillennialism. Grenz summarizes what he terms the "realistic" outlook of amillennial eschatology: "No golden age will come to humankind on earth, except perhaps as the partial triumph now enjoyed by the church in the midst of tribulation. . . . The result is a world view characterized by realism. Victory and defeat, success and failure, good and evil will coexist until the end, amillennialism asserts."²⁹

Historically, most mainstream denominations have been essentially amillennial in their eschatology. Much of the work of founding schools, hospitals, and social service agencies has been carried out under their auspices. By its very nature, amillennial eschatology tends to avoid the excesses of over-identification with or absorption by the world to which some postmillennialists are prone and the withdrawal from the world to which some dispensationalist premillennialists are prone. The amillennialist attitude is well-captured by the following historical example: "At the meeting of the Connecticut Assembly in 1780 there was a sense of approaching judgment, of the world coming to an end. Outside, there was a threatening roll of thunder. The Speaker said, 'Either this is the end of the world or it is not. If it is not, we should proceed with the business. If it is, I prefer to be found doing my duty.'"³⁰

One example of social engagement by amillennialists (along with historic premillennialists) is concern for the environment. In her study of Christian eschatologies and environmentalism, Janel Curry-Roper found that "amillennialism and historic premillennialism have been the most productive of these three main traditions in writings about the environment and mankind's relationship to it."³¹

Eschatology, evangelism, and Christian social action: conclusion

In her study, "Contemporary Christian Eschatologies and Their Relation to

²⁸ Weber, *Living in the Shadow*, 215.

²⁹ Grenz, *Millennial Maze*, 186-87.

³⁰ Travis, *I Believe*, 219.

³¹ Curry-Roper, "Contemporary Christian Eschatologies," 164.

Environmental Stewardship,” Janel Curry-Roper stated, “I believe that eschatology is the most ecologically decisive component of a theological system. It influences adherents’ actions and determines their views of mankind, their bodies, souls, and world-views.”³² Both in the past and present, eschatological views have significantly affected believers’ strategies of evangelism and social action (or social passivity). We need to be aware of these historical tendencies, particularly if our own eschatological view inclines us either to withdraw from active engagement with the world and its problems or inclines us to overestimate our own ability and influence.

By understanding eschatology, we can have a well-integrated theology that enables us to live authentic Christian lives with confidence and hope. Such lives will demonstrate the present reality of the kingdom while we look forward to the final consummation in all its glory.

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³² Ibid., 159.

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