

Lesson 1

INTRODUCTION: EXPLANATION OF VIEWS

The word “eschatology” is derived from the Greek word *eschatos* which means “the last.” Eschatology, therefore, is a study of last things. It is a study of Old Testament and New Testament prophecies and how they are to be interpreted.

Eschatos may be used with reference to the last item in any series, but the implication of the word “eschatology” is not the limited use of the word, but cosmic eventuality or finality. The writers of the Bible frequently refer to an eschatological complex of events as the climax of world history, the resolution and the consummation of God’s cosmic program. (J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*)

WHY STUDY ESCHATOLOGY

We should study prophecy because God is interested in eschatology. We find that the prophetic Scriptures occupy a great portion of the Word of God. In both the Old and New Testaments, whole books are devoted to the subject. In fact, approximately one-fourth of the Word of God was prophetic at the time it was written. If God has devoted that much space to the subject, it certainly behooves us to give attention to it.

Prophecy is important because the world seems headed for some big crisis and the Bible gets us prepared for whatever may happen.

“. . . the modern mind has given itself with special earnestness to eschatological questions, moved thereto, perhaps, by the solemn impression that on it the ends of the world have come, and that some great crisis in the history of human affairs is approaching.” (James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma*)

GENERAL AGREEMENT AMONG ALL EVANGELICALS ON ESCHATOLOGY

Among evangelical scholars there are differences of opinion about the program of prophecy. All evangelicals or fundamentalists believe that Jesus Christ will return, literally and bodily a second time to reward His Church and to judge the wicked, that there will be a resurrection unto life for all who have trusted in Christ and a resurrection unto damnation for those who have rejected Christ. The saints will be taken to heaven to live with Christ forever. These beliefs have been and are common to all Bible-believing Christians throughout all the centuries of church history.

Our fellowship with all evangelicals is in the fact that Christ will come again in His second advent. Evangelicals may disagree on the circumstances that accompany His coming but they do not disagree that He is coming.

Whenever we study eschatology, we must do it with a spirit of meekness and love. No one has all the truth on future events because one’s viewpoint of eschatology depends upon his presuppositions concerning the right method of interpretation. Whenever interpretation is involved, there is always the possibility of error because men are still sinful even though they have the Holy Spirit to help them interpret the Scriptures. The Bible in every detail is inspired truth but there are no inspired interpreters. There is more possibility for error in eschatology than in other areas of theology (soteriology, pneumatology, theology proper, etc.) because we are dealing with things that have not yet happened.

FOUR BASIC ESCHATOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

While all Christians believe the fact that Christ is coming again literally and bodily to this earth, they do not agree on how He is coming again and the events that surround His second coming. The crux of the matter is how to interpret Old Testament prophecies and how to interpret Revelation 20:1-6. Is the millennium spiritual or earthly? Is it fulfilled in the church or at the second advent?

There are four basic eschatological systems found among evangelical Christians and each claims his system is grounded in the Bible—amillennialism (finalism, realized millennialism), postmillennialism and premillennialism (chiliasm, futurism, unrealized millennialism). The premillennial camp can be divided into two distinct groups: historic premillennialism (Covenant-premillennialism) and dispensational premillennialism. Within these four basic systems there is much room for various interpretations. For instance, all amillennials do not agree on every detail of interpretation of prophecy, but they are in a general camp of thinking. Also, there are progressive dispensationalist that agree with strict dispensationalist on minor details but the end result of pretribulation is the same.

There are wide differences between amillennialism and premillennialism, but amillennialism and postmillennialism are much more compatible. Also there are far more similarities between historic premillennialism and dispensational premillennialism than there are differences, although dispensationalism is the most radical of all four interpretations.

What we believe about the secondary issues in eschatology in no way affects our salvation or our personal walk with Jesus Christ, our Lord. We should all be followers of Christ and then students of prophecy. Never let eschatological confusion stand in the way of your personal devotion and commitment to Jesus Christ. It is true that how one views eschatology may influence his thinking about life and world events but it does not affect the fact of salvation and one's constant anticipation of the Lord's return.

AMILLENNIALISM

Some evangelicals believe that Christ will return, there will be a general resurrection unto life and a general resurrection unto death. These scholars are sometimes called amillennialists because they do not believe that there will be an earthly kingdom over which Christ will reign. The word “amillennial” (literally: “no millennium”) is a misnomer, for every amils believes in a real millennium that is fulfilled in a spiritual sense.

No amillennialist denies that the Bible teaches a millennium. But the word amillennialism means “no millennium.” The issue is not whether Revelation 20 teaches a millennium. All amillennialists believe it does. Every conservative is a millennialist, because he accepts the inerrancy of the Scriptures. The distinction, therefore, must be between differing systems of millennialism. The true difference between amillennialism and the other systems involves two things: (1) The nature of the millennium and (2) the chronological position of the millennium in the economy of God. (J. Adams, *The Time Is At Hand*)

Amils would rather be called “finalists” or “realized millennialists.” Realized millennialists contend that the millennium is a present reality, not an earthly utopia but a spiritual reality with Christ reigning in the hearts of true believers. They take the “thousand years” of Revelation. 20 as figurative language and refer it to an indefinite period of time between the first and second advents of Jesus Christ. As finalists, they believe that all Old Testament prophecies are finally fulfilled in the first advent of Christ and the succeeding gospel age.

Some amils do not deny a yet future Anti-Christ, a great apostasy and a time of unprecedented tribulation before the return of Christ, but they would deny a seven year tribulation period. The amils would not deny that there is a future Golden Age but this will take place after the second advent of Christ in the “new heaven and new earth” (2 Pet. 3:12-14; Isa. 65:15; Rev. 20:11).

Realized millennialists, differ, therefore, most strongly from other prophetic schools in that they look for a truly golden (i.e. perfect) age, and a non-utopian millennium. Both post and premil views anticipate a quasi-utopian millennium” (Jay Adams)

An amil may be optimistic (powerful movings of the Holy Spirit towards the time of Christ’s coming), or he may be pessimistic (crisis and tribulation towards the of Christ’s coming).

See Chart #1 – Lesson 1

1. Imminent return of Christ (no signs before Christ’s return).
2. Perfect golden age.
3. Pessimistic (things will get worse), or optimistic (powerful movings of the Spirit).
4. Old Testament Scriptures fulfilled actually but spiritually through Christ and the Church.
5. Millennium an indefinite period of time.
6. No future for Israel because church is spiritual Israel.
7. May accept a future Antichrist, apostasy, tribulation.
8. Church began in seed form with Adam or Abraham.

POSTMILLENNIALISM

Some evangelicals believe that through the preaching of the gospel by the church that the world will get better and better because of mass conversions. God will establish His millennial kingdom on earth through the church and then Christ will return and there will be a general resurrection and judgment.

“The postmil looks for a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of a glorious age of the church upon earth through the preaching of the gospel under the power of the Holy Spirit. He looks forward to all nations becoming Christian and living in peace one with another. He relates all prophecies to history and time. After the triumph of Christianity throughout the earth he looks for the second coming of the Lord. There are, of course, differences of opinion concerning details among the Pasts as among other schools of thought” (J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory*).

“The Millennium to which the Postmillennialist looks forward is thus a golden age of spiritual prosperity during this present dispensation, that is, during the Church age, and is to be brought about through forces now active in the world. It is an indefinitely long period of time, perhaps much longer than a literal one thousand years. The changed character of individuals will be reflected in an uplifted social, economic, political and cultural life of mankind. The world at large will then enjoy a state of righteousness such as at the present time has been seen only in relatively small and isolated groups, as for example in some family circles, some local church groups and kindred organizations.

This does not mean that there ever will be a time on this earth when every person will be a Christian, or that all sin will be abolished. But it does mean that evil in all its many forms eventually will be reduced to negligible proportions, that Christian principles will be the rule, not the exception, and that Christ will return to a truly Christianized world” (L. Boettner, *The Millennium*).

See Chart #2 – Lesson 1

1. No imminent return because millennium must come first.
2. Semi-perfect golden age on earth.
3. Optimistic (things are getting better and better).

4. Most Old Testament Scriptures fulfilled actually in Christ but a world kingdom to be established through the church.
5. Millennium is on earth and an indefinite period of time.
6. Future for Israel for at or around the coming of Christ, there will be mass conversions of Jews.
7. Reject a future Antichrist, apostasy and tribulation.
8. Church began in seed form with Adam and Abraham.

HISTORIC PREMILLENNIALISM (Covenant- premillennialism)

Some evangelical scholars believe that Christ will return and establish His kingdom over this earth. The earthly kingdom will be brought in by the cataclysmic event of the second advent. There will be a future tribulation and anti-Christ before the return of Christ. The church will go through the Tribulation anticipating the return of the Lord. The Tribulation may or may not be seven years in length and the millennium may or may not be exactly one thousand years but there will be an earthly kingdom, which Christ will rule over after His second advent. At Christ's second advent, all true believers (of all time) will be resurrected and enjoy the blessings of the earthly kingdom. At the end of the earthly reign of Christ, there will be the resurrection of all unbelievers and they shall be cast into the Lake of Fire. All true believers will then enter into the eternal kingdom which is the "new heaven and new earth."

See Chart #3 – Lesson 1

1. Christ's return not imminent because church must first go through the tribulation.
2. Semi-perfected golden age
3. Pessimistic
4. Old Testament Scriptures fulfilled literally as stated.
5. Millennium a definite period of time, probably 1000 years.
6. A future for Israel which is Christianized but gives Old Testament promises in a New Testament spirit.
7. A future Antichrist, apostasy and tribulation.
8. Church began at Pentecost and Old Testament saints became part of the church at that time. Church is closely related to Israel but not the same.

DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM

The proponents of this view believe that the true church will be taken out of this earth before the Tribulation period, that there will be seven years of tribulation which is more terrifying than anything this world has ever known; then Christ will return with His church to establish His kingdom for one thousand years, where He will reign from Jerusalem and fulfill all the promises and prophecies he made to Israel in the Old Testament. There is a sharp distinction made between Israel and the Church and the Tribulation and millennium are given a Jewish flavor.

See Chart #4 – Lesson 1

1. Christ's return is imminent.
2. Semi-perfected golden age.
3. Pessimistic.
4. Old Testament prophecies fulfilled literally.
5. Millennium a period of one thousand years..
6. A future for Israel with a restoration of Judaism, even the Old Testament sacrificial system.
7. A future Antichrist apostasy and tribulation.
8. Church began on the Day of Pentecost and will be raptured before the Tribulation period.

DANGERS IN STUDYING ESCHATOLOGY

A study of prophecy, not coupled with genuine scholarship and love, can be very dangerous. Many fanatics in prophecy have brought a real disgrace to the Church of Jesus Christ.

Spiritual Pride

A little knowledge puffs up and this is true in the area of prophecy. There are many who have become spiritually proud because they have been taught prophetic truths. Because they are able to understand something about the Book of Revelation, or differentiate between the first and second beasts, or are able to interpret Daniel's image, they think they possess a spirituality that puts them on a superior plan to other Christians.

A person attends a prophecy conference and thinks he knows it all. If prophecy produces pride then it is a tool in the hands of Satan.

False Basis of Fellowship

Opinions about prophecy have become a false basis for fellowship among many Christians. Fellowship between believers is on the basis of the person and work of Jesus Christ. All truly saved people should be able to have fellowship around Jesus Christ, their Lord and Savior. We must be ever so careful about elevating some doctrine above the person of Christ.

Remove Christ As the Center of Prophecy

There are those who study all the details of prophecy and miss seeing Jesus Christ as the center of prophecy. All scripture is written to reveal Christ.

If we become so interested in the Antichrist that Jesus Christ is removed from the place of centrality, and if we study the Word only to see *on* which side the beast parts his hair, and miss the Lord Jesus Christ, then we have been sidetracked and derailed from that which is pre-eminent. Remember that it is the Spirit's work to reveal Christ, not Antichrist to us! Prophecy must make us worship Christ (Rev. 4:8-11).

Thrill Seeking

There is within man an insatiable curiosity about the future. That is why the natural man is drawn to fortunetellers, soothsayers and astrologers. However, prophecy was not given just to fulfill our idol curiosity but it was given to give us insight into the plans and purposes of Almighty God.

It is easy to get a church full of people when speaking on prophecy but if the subject is personal holiness or evangelism, the interest wanes.

Dogmatism

There is a great danger of thinking that we have all the truth on the subject of prophecy and then take dogmatic stands, which we cannot substantiate from a close examination of scripture. We must be careful about becoming date setters, and we must always be flexible and admit we might be wrong.

We Christians today are much like the prophets in the Old Testament. The prophets knew that Christ was coming to reign and to suffer but they could not make out all the details. They saw the broad plan of prophecy but could not put all the details in logical order. So we too may see the general plan but the details are still quite hazy.