

Eschatology is a subject that few Christians know about, but many Christians fight about. The word 'eschatology' comes from two Greek words which mean 'the study of the last things' or 'the teaching of the last things'. The subject of eschatology includes Jesus' death and resurrection, the end of the world, the return of Christ, judgment, heaven, hell and the new creation. Arguments over the details of the Millennium obscure the real, underlying issues of disagreement: how we interpret the Bible, especially our understanding of how the New Testament relates to the Old Testament. The way we understand eschatology has important implications for healing ministries and the place of social concerns in the world today.

There are three main positions on the Millennium: pre-Millennialism, post-Millennialism and Amillennialism.¹ The word 'Millennium' means 'a thousand years'. Revelation 20:1-10 talks about a thousand year period in which Satan is bound and the saints reign with Christ. Christians disagree about when and how this is fulfilled. Amillennialists believe that it refers to the present age when Satan has been bound through the work of Christ on the cross and we await his return. Post-Millennialists look forward to the Millennium as an age in which the world becomes largely Christianised, ending with Christ's return. Pre-Millennialists see the thousand year reign as the period between the coming of Christ and the last judgment, when Christ returns to establish his kingdom on earth for a thousand years. Within these differing schools of thought there are many sub-divisions, especially among pre-Millennialists, who are divided into groups such as historic pre-Millennialists and dispensationalists. So heated and overwhelming are the complexities of the discussion that some call themselves pan-Millennialists, since it's all going to pan out in the end!

Debates over the Millennium have grown far out of proportion. The Millennium is only referred to once in the Bible: in Revelation 20:1-10. Revelation isn't easy to understand and this chapter is open to several different interpretations. But once they've decided on the meaning of this passage, people find their Millennial view scattered through the rest of the Bible. This is a common error in Biblical interpretation: moving from the difficult to the simple.

A better methodology is to look at what the Bible as a whole says about expectations for the end. After all, this isn't a subject that comes up rarely, but frequently in the Bible. The Old Testament looks forward to a new age and is full of promise for the future. The New Testament consistently sees Jesus as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. So much is the New Testament a fulfillment of the Old that the New Testament age is often called 'the last age' (1 Corinthians 10:11; Hebrews 1:1-2). It was possible for Christians to misunderstand the teaching of the New Testament to mean that the end had already come (2 Thessalonians 2:2).

Yet the New Testament also anticipates the return of Christ, a coming judgment day and a future resurrection. In Acts 2, the apostle Peter describes the giving of the Spirit as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel about the last days. But in Ephesians 1, Paul describes the giving of the Spirit as the first down-payment and guarantee of our inheritance until the day of redemption. So the New Testament teaches us that the kingdom of God has come but is also yet to come.

This is complicated by the fact that the New Testament is divided between things taught before

the death and resurrection of Jesus and things taught after the death and resurrection of Jesus. So when Jesus is speaking to his disciples before his death about the coming of the Kingdom of God, is he talking about his return at the end of the world, or his death and resurrection? Or is he speaking about both? This makes Mark 13, Matthew 24-25 and Luke 21 particularly complex and difficult to interpret.

In his victory over Satan at Calvary, Jesus gave believers access to God, citizenship in God's kingdom and membership in God's family: privileges at the very heart of our eternal state. Yet not all is complete: we still wait for the resurrection of our bodies at the judgment, the condemnation and destruction of this world order, and the creation of the new heavens and the new earth. So the kingdom of God has come and is yet to come.

The same tension can be seen in the Bible's teaching on the resurrection. In Ephesians 2:6, Paul says that God has raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. Our resurrection has already taken place. In Colossians 3 Paul can appeal to us as if we have been raised with Christ. On the other hand, Romans 8 says that the whole world has been subjected to futility by the will of God and is now groaning with suffering as it waits eagerly for the revelation of the sons of God. Meanwhile, we who are sons of God and therefore have the first fruits of the Spirit "groan inwardly as we await eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." In my rebirth I was spiritually resurrected, yet my body waits for the resurrection when the new heavens and the new earth come. So I have been resurrected and I am yet to be resurrected.

The tension of the now and not yet runs through the New Testament and the Christian life. The temptation for Christians is to lessen the tension by either emphasising the now or emphasising the not yet. In today's scene, errors commonly arise from those who want to emphasise the now and leave out the not yet. Until Christ returns, this world will continue to be riddled with sin, injustice, immorality, sickness, pain, suffering and death. Yet some people, reading the promises of God for the new age and knowing that we have the first down-payment, are claiming that living in the kingdom of God in this world should lead to health and prosperity, justice and equity.

Furthermore, others proclaim that it is our responsibility as kingdom dwellers to bring about justice, truth, health, wealth and equity. They don't perceive that it is the work of Christ to bring about these things when he returns to judge and bring in a new world order. Nor do they perceive that the suffering, trials and difficulties of this world order are meant to keep us looking forward to the age to come, and to continue to provide unbelievers with an opportunity to repent (Romans 8:17-25; 2 Peter 3:3-13).

This issue also has implications for the way in which we see Old Testament prophecies about Israel being fulfilled in modern politics. The Armageddon syndrome of American politicians comes from a failure to understand how the New Testament has fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies. In other words, it comes from a failure to emphasise the idea that the kingdom of God has already come. The city of God, the Jerusalem of Old Testament prophecies, is heaven, not the city in the Middle East. Christians should look for the fulfillment of God's promises in the gospel rather than in the politics of Zionism.

Endnotes

¹ See the article on 'Eschatology' in The New Bible Dictionary, the section on Revelation 20 in Michael Wilcock's book I Saw Heaven Opened (Revelation 20), and Graham Goldsworthy's book The Gospel in Revelation pp 18-20

Discussion Starters

1. What does Romans 8:18-39 teach us about living now in the light of what is to come?
2. Think about Christian groups, denominations, sects and cults and work out their view of the end of the world. Do they emphasise the kingdom already having come or is their emphasis on the kingdom not yet come?