

New Testament Eschatological Vision of Christ.

by

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Unbelievers often make valid forecasts regarding the future founded on observing habits of past occurrences, but it is unmistakable that no human can honestly *know*. Thus, unbelievers cannot have specific facts about any future possibility. For the Bible-believing Christian, however, the position is different. Though the Christian can never know everything about future events, God, on the other hand, knows everything because he has informed one in Scripture of the significant historical events yet to come. Because of this, one can understand that these events will happen because “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind” (Num. 23:19).

One may ask: what is the essential need for studying eschatology? According to Erickson, eschatology is related to other doctrines with various conceptions, though some theologians regard it as an appendage or the completion of some other ideology<sup>1</sup>. In this regard, it has sometimes been deemed a part of salvation. When viewed as examining Christ’s final steps in establishing his rule in the world, eschatology completes the doctrine of Christ’s work. It is also considered fastened to the church’s doctrine, for example, considering Augustine’s kingdom of the church discussion.<sup>2</sup> Other theologians regard eschatology as a separate doctrine tantamount to other significant doctrines. In contrast, others think it supreme, believing it sums up all others and brings them to their fulfillment. Finally, a few argue that the whole of theology is eschatology.

Many heated debates have been had in the church’s history regarding the future. Beginning with the aspects of Christ’s second coming, where all evangelicals agree, then moving to a matter of disagreement, Christ’s return at any time, one notes the eschatological implications of Jesus’ spoken words regarding his first and second advents. The acts of the first advent (redemption, reconciliation, and restoration) synthesized with those of the latter

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<sup>1</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1056.

<sup>2</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, 20.6-10, esp. 9 (New York, NY: Penguin, 2003), 903-18.

(the rapture of the church and judgment at the day of the Lord) forge the complete salvific framework of the eschatological community, the church. The historical writings of the early church fathers substantiate conveyance of these Scriptures as a part of the Great Commission, as communicated in Matthew 28:18-20.

The return of Christ in Scripture will be sudden, personal, visible, and bodily. Jesus repeatedly articulated these truths concerning this historical event. “Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” (Matt. 24:44). In the upper room discourse Jesus said, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” (John 14:3). Two angels appear to the disciples after Jesus’ ascension into heaven and say, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11). Paul presented, “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first (1 Thess. 4:16). F. F. Bruce<sup>3</sup> notes that Hebrew’s author presents Christ as entering into the heavenly holy of holies to re-appear to those who expect him. At his first coming, sin has been dealt with, but at his second coming, all will enjoy all Christ has won for them in perpetual fulness at his second coming. “...so, Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb. 9:28). “You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand” (James 5:8), and “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed” (2 Peter 3:10) provide for Jesus’ sudden return. John provides believers a personal message of Christ:

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<sup>3</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 233.

“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2). “He who testifies to these things says, “Surely, I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20) is comprised of Jesus’ promise to return and John’s response.

Surveillance of the eschatological prophetic aim of Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, the Parable of the Wheat and Tares illuminates both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan present and growing together in the world while anticipating the end of the age. Subsequent is the eschatological portrait in Revelation, revealing Satan’s ulterior motive exposed throughout history, consisting of a scheme of lies, duplicity, and apostasy. His clandestine strategy of enlisting proselytes to the kingdom of darkness in rebellion against God’s kingdom ends with his ultimate defeat and those following him cast into the lake of fire forever. John’s response noted in Rev. 22:20, should characterize Christian’s hearts— those who eagerly await Christ’s return while his appearing of salvation and grace train “us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:12-13).

The dispensationalist proposes one must be cautious when mentioning the two kingdoms in Scripture so as not to confuse them. One is Jewish, Davidic, and Messianic, the kingdom of heaven, and one is more inclusive, the kingdom of God. Israel rejected the kingdom of heaven during Jesus’ earthly ministry and, as a result, postponed its appearance on earth. The kingdom of God contrastingly encompasses all moral intelligence submitted to God’s will in every period, including the angels and saints. However, the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are one as Christ uses them interchangeably in communicating to the rich young ruler. “Then Jesus said to his disciples, I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:23). The messianic fulfillment of the Old

Testament is the kingdom's inauguration at Christ's first coming, though not its consummation. Upon ascension into heaven, Christ received his investiture as the King of kings and Lord of lords. Thus, the establishment of a new covenant through God's Messiah delivers God's kingdom rule over his creation in the present world, anticipating its consummation at Christ's second coming resulting in God's kingdom in the new heavens and earth as the new Eden.

As one declared earlier, all evangelicals agree on the final results of Christ's return—the judgment of all unbelievers and the final reward of believers, and the reign of believers with Christ in a new heaven and a new earth for all eternity. Nevertheless, there is disparity over the details of these future events, specifically, the millennium and Christ's relation to it, the sequence of events of Christ's return and the earth's great tribulation, and the Jews' salvation. The disparity involves the interpretation of several passages correlating to these possibilities, but these matters should not be seen as secondary importance, not as discrepancies over primary doctrinal issues.

Nevertheless, questioning whether Christ could return at any time advances two possible methods to address this split amongst evangelicals. On the one hand, Christ could return at an unexpected hour based on many passages telling those waiting to be ready, and, on the other hand, several passages express specific events that will occur before Christ returns. Answering these tensions resulted in a number of Christians concluding that Christ could return at any time, while others concluded that for at least a generation, Christ's return would be slowed, claiming that it would take some time to fulfill some of the foreseen events. Verses predicting the unexpected sudden coming of Christ include Matt. 24:42-44, 50; Mark 13:32-33; 34-37; Luke 12:40; 1 Cor. 16:22; 1 Thess. 5:2; Titus 2:12-13; Heb. 10:25; James 5:7-9; 1 Pet. 4:7; Rev. 1:3; 22:7, 12, 20. Signs preceding Christ's return include: The Preaching of the Gospel to All Nations, Mark 13:10; The Great Tribulation, Mark 13:7, 19-

20; Matt. 24:15-22, Luke 21:20-24; The Coming of the Man of Sin, 2 Thess. 2:1-10; 1 John 2:18; and the Salvation of Israel, Rom. 11:12, 25-26 to name a few.

Baptism is an ordinance of the church with significant meaning. However, there are several significant views according to Scripture. First, baptism is given to the church by God as a means to publicly declare one's faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and evidence that redemption has been accomplished in the individual (Acts 2:37). Second, Christian baptism, in distinction to Jewish proselyte baptism, implies the believer's unification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (Rom.6:3-7). Third, baptism is the significance of the believer's position and union with the eschatological community. Lastly, baptism is the promise of the consummation of all things by Christ. The weight of this consummation reveals an elevated hermeneutic.

John's baptism as an eschatological ceremony illustrates the anticipation of the coming Messiah, his rule over the kingdom of God, and the actual new covenant age. In contrast to John's baptism's anticipated fulfillment, Christian baptism is also eschatological but indicates what has arrived in Christ. Thus, through Christ, the believer has entered the arrival of the new creation and the new covenant. Consequently, water baptism looks rearward to Christ's first coming in the inauguration of a new age and looks forward to the consummation at his second coming. One experiences these realities by baptism. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come" (2Cor. 5:17).

The Great Commission of Matthew 28: 18-20 is an eschatological reference that envisions the conversion of people to Israel's Messiah from "all the nations." This phrase, *panta ta ethne*, the Koine Greek translation of "all the nations," emerges in two of five of Jesus' post-resurrection dialogues (Matthew 28:19; Luke 24:47) with his disciples regarding the Gospel of the Kingdom. The ingathering of the lost sheep of the house of Israel and the conversion of foreigners to Israelite's covenant with God develops out of Isaiah 56:1-8 and

connects other Second Temple Jewish texts. The inclusion of Gentiles into eschatological Israel advocated by Matthew is fundamentally distinguishable from Paul's.<sup>4</sup>

In this critical hour of the church, the subject of Christ's return is often avoided along with other occurrences encompassing this significant historical event for several reasons. It is averted because former generations of Christian leaders exchanged biblical eschatology for foolish speculation parroted in their cultural backgrounds. The leaders whose speculative theories and those Christians that plunged into date-setting as the myriad of fortune-tellers do permanently damage the body of Christ with their brash nonsense. Furthermore, when biblical teaching is misunderstood as primarily informational, further loss of the meaning of Scripture results in off-the-cuff hermeneutics. Here, one is reminded that eschatology is good for the church. It reminds the church that God's redemptive plan for his people was not haphazard nor a secondary scheme but rather a plan that includes the return of his Son. Ultimately, all must be one in Christ's new covenant, though the dimension to the kingdom, the church, the fulfillment of prophecy, and the promise of the Old Testament and its interpretation is already, but not yet. God is not finished with Israel. The oracles (Rms. 9:1-5) nor the OT Scriptures have been taken away from Israel and delivered to others who can apply their meaning to themselves while ignoring their significance to Israel. "The church is the heir of Israel, not its replacement."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the Scripture belongs to and has meaning for both.

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<sup>4</sup> Ben White., *The Eschatological Conversion of 'All the Nations' in Matthew 28.19-20.*, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288494186\\_The\\_Eschatological\\_Conversion\\_of\\_%27All\\_the\\_Nations%27\\_in\\_Matthew\\_2819-20\\_Misreading\\_Matthew\\_through\\_Paul](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288494186_The_Eschatological_Conversion_of_%27All_the_Nations%27_in_Matthew_2819-20_Misreading_Matthew_through_Paul)

<sup>5</sup> Ben Witherington, *Torah Old and New* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2018), 326.

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