

The Last Things - by Mick Taylor

If you don't know what 'eschatology' means - is it the end of the world?

Eschatology literally means 'last things' which can sound rather remote and irrelevant. Many British Christians have a vague memory of seeing 'Eschatology' as the final chapter in a book about Systematic Theology but the truth is that they don't worry too much about it and are probably concerned that anyone showing an interest in the topic may be displaying early symptoms of an unfortunate spiritual disease. Of course, there is a minority who rather encourage this idea by making the 'last things' the first and only thing they want to talk about.

This series of blogs aims to clarify and evaluate the four main positions that Bible-believing Christians have adopted about the events surrounding the return of our Lord and show how the conclusions that you reach on this topic affect your vision for the church and your engagement in mission. Eschatology is not to be dismissed as an irrelevant extra but should be the fuel, a driving motivation, for all we do. Anthony Hoekema put it like this,

From first to last, and not merely in epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving and therefore revolutionising and transforming the present. (A A Hoekema - The Bible and the Future, p3)

Where Christians are vague or confused about eschatology it can often indicate compromise or at least an accommodation with the world as it is. People are either too comfortable with the way things are or despairing that things will ever change.

What is agreed

The resources for understanding what the Scriptures teach about eschatology are many and varied. They stretch back into the beginning of the Old Testament where God promises the serpent that one day 'his head would be crushed' by one who is a descendant of Eve, (Genesis 3:15) and goes through to the end of Revelation with a vision of the New Heavens on the New Earth (Revelation 21:1-2;). Along the way prophets, apostles and the Lord himself make many statements that give glimpses of what's in store - but none of them spell it out in detail. It's a bit like having been given a variety of jigsaw pieces but no picture to work from. Most Christians agree on the pieces but there is real debate about how they fit together.

So, before considering the different schemes of how things will work out at the end, it's helpful to consider the key elements on which most Christians agree. These are:

- The personal return of Jesus to this world. (Acts 1:11)
- Rapture: from 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 we learn that at His return the dead will be raised and those still alive will join them to meet Christ in the air. Note: Tom Wright and others think this is symbolic language and not to be taken literally but this is a minority position amongst evangelicals.
- Tribulation. There are various verses that indicate that towards the End there will be times of great stress and difficulty which will affect both Christians and the world as a whole. (Matthew 24: 21-22)
- Millennium. In Revelation 20:1-6 we read of the 1000 year reign of Christ with his saints.
- Judgement of the living and the dead.
- The ushering in of New Heavens and New Earth.

Four Major Views

From these pieces of scriptural jigsaw four major views have been developed and they are defined by how they understand the relationship between Christ's return to the earth and the millennium. The four positions are:

1. Classic Pre-millennialism
2. Dispensational Pre-millennialism
3. Post-millennialism
4. A-millennialism

In both Classic and Dispensational pre-millennialism Christ is seen as returning before the millennium. While for the Post-millennialist Christ will return only after the millennium. For A-millennialists the millennium is not a totally future event because it represents the period between the two comings of Christ which means we are in the millennium now!

So Pre-millennialism has two varieties, Classic and Dispensational. For clarity it is helpful to consider them together but it is also important to note there are significant differences. They agree that Christ will come before a literal reign of 1000 years on earth. They differ in their history and in key elements of their teaching including what happens at the rapture and concerning the role of Israel.

Classic pre-millennialism has its roots in the very early history of the church. In the first few centuries it was this view that was dominant. The scheme of end times would be:

TRIBULATION - RETURN OF CHRIST - MILLENNIUM - FINAL REBELLION - JUDGEMENT - FINAL STATE.

In support of this view is the fact that it follows the pattern Revelation 19 and 20. Against this view is it is only in one small section of a highly symbolic book that a millennium is mentioned (Revelation 19-20).

Dispensational Pre-millennialism

Dispensational Pre-millennialism is a much more recent teaching began with J N Darby, a founder of the Brethren Movement in the in the early 19th century. It became hugely influential through the notes in the Schofield Reference Bible and is a dominant perspective of many Christian fundamentalists, especially in the USA.

A particular distinctive of the Dispensational Pre-millennialist view is the secret return of Christ at the Rapture. In this teaching (at least in its original form) Christians will not endure the tribulation but will be secretly raptured before it starts as in the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Non-Christians will not see Christ appear but will be shocked by the disappearance of all true Christians. During the ensuing period of Tribulation the Anti-Christ will appear and will at the end of a period of seven years wage war on those who have become Christians during this time. This will include the vast majority of the Jews. The conflict will reach its climax at the battle of Armageddon (Rev 16:16) and when defeat looks inevitable Christ will return in glory with the raptured saints. This time every eye will see him. Then begins the 1000 year reign of Christ on the earth in which the Jewish Christians will take a leading role and all the unfilled promises of the OT concerning Israel are fulfilled including the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

So for dispensational pre-millennialists the scheme is:

SECRET RAPTURE - TRIBULATION - RETURN OF CHRIST - MILLENNIUM - FINAL REBELLION - JUDGEMENT - FINAL STATE

Behind this slightly different scheme lie less obvious but even more significant issues. Key to this view is that the Old Testament promises about Israel have to have a literal

fulfilment. So the apostolic interpretation, that many of these are fulfilled in the coming of Christ and His resurrection, is downplayed. (Acts 13:32-34). Along with this, dispensationalists conclude that God has, in a sense, two people. The Jews and the Church both have a destiny but they are different. Israel has an earthly destiny the church has a heavenly one. Often those who hold this view also adopt an uncritical pro-Israeli attitude in regard to present day tensions in the Middle East.

The most comfortable option!

Post-millennialists are a happy optimistic group. ☺ Not surprising because this scheme teaches that the progress of the gospel will continue to grow until, through worldwide revival, the whole world is Christianised, so that while not everyone will become a Christian every culture will be dominated by Christian values and world view. Only after a period of extraordinary blessing and progress (the Millennium) will Christ return. They believe that during the Millennium Christ will reign through His church - not by His bodily presence. The Great Commission is a key text for those who hold this position. In Matt 28:18-20 it talks of making disciples of all nations, not just preaching to them.

This commission is not merely an announcement that the gospel will be preached but implies a promise that the effectual evangelisation of all the nations will be completed before Christ returns. (Lorraine Boettner - The Meaning of the Millennium ed. Robert Clouse p118).

So the scheme in this view is

FIRST COMING OF CHRIST - CHURCH INCREASING IN INFLUENCE - MILLENNIUM - RETURN OF CHRIST.

What is obviously missing here is tribulation. Some who hold this view would allow for a rebellion at the end of the Millennium but do not major on this. Others would argue that in fact the tribulation predicted in scripture was to do with the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD and other events of the first century. (Technically this is known as a Preterist view of prophecy). Given the choice, this would probably be every Christian's preferred view but it is questionable if it does justice to the sense in scripture of a continuing tension and struggle between the kingdom of God and the forces of evil before the end which the scripture frequently underlines. Interestingly, Post-millennialism has often grown out of the experience of revival, so Jonathan Edwards, who was a key leader in the Great Awakening, held this view. As Iain Murray, in his book *The Puritan Hope*, makes clear many of the English Puritans held this view too. Other proponents include B B Warfield and Lorraine Boettner.

A-millennialism

Atheism means no belief in God. A-millennialism doesn't mean no belief in the millennium but rather that the millennium covers the entire period from the first coming of Christ to His second coming.

This was the view that Augustine of Hippo set out in his great book *The City of God* (early 5th century). While Pre-millennialists read Revelation and especially chapters 19 & 20 chronologically this view sees the book as a series of overlapping visions which complement each other. The 1000 years in Revelation 20:1-6 is seen as symbolic of a long period, a symbolic number in a book of symbolic numbers. The binding of Satan in Revelation 20:2 was achieved through the life and death and resurrection of Christ. So Jesus taught that He could cast out demons because He 'had bound the strong man' (Matt 12:29). In the ministry of the 70, He saw Satan fall like lightning (Luke 10:18) and Paul writes of the disarming of the principalities and powers through the death of Christ (Colossians 2:15). The limiting of Satan's power, it is argued, is seen most clearly in the Gentiles pouring into the church of God.

So the A-millennial scheme looks like this:

FIRST COMING OF CHRIST - MILLENNIUM - TRIBULATION - SECOND COMING OF CHRIST - JUDGEMENT - NEW HEAVENS AND EARTH

Evaluation: Biblical Roots and Spiritual Fruit

If the four millennial views are placed on a spectrum according to their attitude to mission and the church, then a clear pattern emerges.

Post-millennialists are the most optimistic about the church and have the widest possible view of mission. For them the Church will be so effective in evangelism that one day Christians will be the dominant influence in society and international relations. Mission is seen as bringing the Lordship of Christ to bear on every sphere of culture.

Dispensational pre-millennialists are at the other end of the spectrum. Historically they have been negative about the Church and have a very narrow view of mission. A foundation of the dispensational view is that during different periods of history (dispensations) God has worked in different ways giving people different tests. In the Garden of Eden it was not to eat the fruit, now it is to believe in Christ. Every dispensation has ended in failure. The letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation 1-3 are often seen as representing the history of the Church and according to this view we are now in the period of the Laodicean church - lukewarm and fit only to be spat out! Mission is seen almost exclusively in terms of evangelism and the institutional church, at least, is doomed to failure.

Typically *Classic pre-millennialists* and *a-millennialists* have sat between these extremes. Through history the Church has known times of significant growth and influence but also the reverse. Until the end this oscillation is thought to continue. It's what I call a Ho-Hum attitude to church and mission.

So – which view is the right one?

Biblically, I would argue that the Post-millennialism and Dispensationalism should be rejected. Post-millennialism, while attractive, ignores too much biblical material and minimises the on-going battle with evil. Dispensationalism cannot be accused of ignoring scripture but it does handle it in a peculiar way. Particularly it ignores how the apostles consistently saw Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel being fulfilled in Christ and the NT Church.

Also, to make the system work many things are divided which more naturally fit together. For instance, in the dispensational view there will be multiple judgements in the future. There will be the judgement of believers' works at the rapture, then a judgement of Gentiles before the millennium, a separate judgement of Israel and judgement of the wicked at the end of the millennium. Similarly there are multiple resurrections at the rapture, the beginning and end of the millennium. It's as though pieces of jigsaw have been torn into segments and forced to fit in different places in the puzzle.

This leaves Classic pre-millennialism and a-millennialism as schemes which do the most justice to the biblically material. Both have strengths and weaknesses and areas of uncertainty that probably won't be resolved before the great day of Christ's return. On balance I find a-millennialism makes the best sense and, for me, handles the material in Revelation as a whole and the key verses in chapter 20 in a way that is sensitive to the nature of apocalyptic literature.

One development in a-millennial thinking that has recently been evident is a non-triumphalistic yet optimistic and positive view of the church and its mission. While agreeing that the battle with evil will continue and that at the end we can expect this to

reach an unprecedented level, alongside this there will be an equally evident increase in the vibrancy and purity of the Church. The choice for the watching world will be even more clearly pronounced and the Church will be victoriously defiant as it waits for the Lord of Lords and King of Kings. We are called to build such a church, for the glory of God and the honour of Christ. This modification is significant and surely right. We should look forward to a glorious Church but it will always be in conflict with the forces of darkness until Jesus returns.

A Final Word

It is easy to let the debates about different eschatological frameworks obscure the fact that the New Testament writers were convinced that they had already experienced the beginnings of the new creation in Christ's resurrection. The longed-for Kingdom of God was not just a future expectation but also a reality which broke into our fallen world through the power of the Spirit. That is what inspired them into mission - as it should also motivate us. We are not just called to plod on with limited resources until Christ returns. Rather, we are called to advance His Kingdom in the world today. When we pray, 'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' we should anticipate some answers in the here and now, not just at the Second Coming. In a fallen, broken creation the Church is the Hope of the World - because in it the powers of the age to come have already broken in.

If you want to read more about this, among the books I have found the most helpful on this topic are:

The Meaning of the Millennium – Four Views ed. Robert Clouse

The Bible and the Future - A A Hoekema

The Meaning of the Millennium - Michael Gilbertson (Grove booklet)

The End Times - John Hosier

What the Bible Teaches about the End of the World - Bruce Milne.

Surprised by Hope - Tom Wright

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