

# Editorial: Thinking Biblically and Theologically about Eschatology

*Stephen J. Wellum*

UNFORTUNATELY, THE VERY word “eschatology” often generates diverse perspectives and much heated discussion within the church, which results in a couple of tendencies. On the one hand, the tendency is to reduce all discussion of “eschatology” to a specific end times position—identified with some forms

of dispensational theology (but certainly not all forms)—which presents eschatology as merely what will occur at the end of history identified with such events as the rapture of the church, the Great Tribulation, the battle of Armageddon, the establishment of the millennial reign of Christ, and so on. This popular understanding of eschatology has been promoted in best-selling books, through movies, and through the use of elaborate charts that attempt to correlate precisely the book of Revelation with today’s world events. This approach to eschatology is not entirely improper;

the Bible does say a lot about the events surrounding the second coming of our Lord and proponents of this view are correct to desire that the Bible governs all of their thinking in every area of life, including the end times. However, given how often people’s predictions have not materialized the way they have thought, one begins to wonder if our use of the book of Revelation is more than what God intended and if our understanding of eschatology is a bit skewed. One must be very careful that our study of eschatology does not degenerate into mere speculation, divorced from what Scripture actually teaches, which reveals more of the creativity of the teacher and one’s theological system than the truth of the biblical text and an overall biblical understanding of eschatology.

On the other hand, there is a tendency today to go to the opposite extreme and not to preach and teach about eschatological matters at all. There are probably numerous reasons for this tendency. Some may tend in this direction as an overreaction to the first approach to eschatology so that, in their thinking any discussion of eschatology

---

STEPHEN J. WELLUM is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Dr. Wellum received his Ph.D. degree in theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and has also taught theology at the Associated Canadian Theological Schools and Northwest Baptist Theological College and Seminary in Canada. He has contributed to several publications and a collection of essays on theology and worldview issues.

---

inevitably leads to predictions and charts, and thus it must be avoided entirely. However, there may be an additional reason which, if we are not careful, may reflect our sad state of being more conformed to this world and its thoroughly secular mindset, i.e., a “this-worldly” perspective, instead of being transformed by God’s Word (see Rom 12:1-2). People such as David Wells, Os Guinness, and Peter Berger, have documented well the effects of secularization on the church where eternal matters are not only privatized but also pushed to the margins of our lives. Instead of viewing our lives *sub specie aeternitatis*—“from the perspective of eternity”—we often reflect our satisfaction with “this world” and “this age,” even in all of its fallenness and depravity. We do not long for the consummation of the ages and the blessed appearing of our Lord Jesus and with him, the dawning of the new heavens and new earth where sin, death, and all that blights this world are finally and completely destroyed, and righteousness dwells. In truth, it may be this last tendency which is more dangerous, deceptive, and indicative of our spiritual state than the first one. In our hesitation to wrestle with eschatological matters we must make sure that it is not this last reason which dominates our thinking and captivates our hearts. We must never forget that our hope is not found in “this world” or in the things and affairs of this world, as attractive and important as they may be. Instead, our hope is only found in our great and glorious Triune God and his gracious redemptive work—a work which is the outworking of his eternal plan across the ages, now centered, accomplished, and fulfilled in the Lord of Glory.

What, then, is the solution to these two tendencies today? First, it is to acknowledge the danger and pitfalls of both of them and to avoid the extremes. Second, as in all of our doctrinal formulations and practical living, the best solution is to return to the Scripture again and again and make sure our understanding of eschatology is biblically and theologically faithful and grounded. The Reformation slogans of *sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”) and *semper reformanda* (“always reform-

ing”) must be engraved on our hearts and minds in every generation as we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. As we return to the Scripture, we must guard against the temptation to divorce biblical eschatology from the gospel and thus our Lord Jesus Christ. After all, the purpose of biblical eschatology is always redemptive, ethical, and Christological. It is redemptive and ethical in the sense that, in the simplest of terms, biblical eschatology attempts to unfold God’s eternal plan in history, beginning with creation and ending in the new creation, and as such, it always calls us to live in the present as God’s obedient children in light of God’s great redemptive work. In this way, eschatology exhorts us to faithfulness to Christ and the gospel, and it warns us of its opposite.

In addition and most important, biblical eschatology is also Christological and thus gospel-centered. In truth, eschatology, properly understood, is nothing more than a thorough study of God’s great act of redemption in Jesus the Christ. Eschatology, then, not only presents us with the Bible’s metanarrative, it also unpacks how that grand story is centered in Jesus. How our Lord was not only anticipated and predicted in the OT, but how, in our Lord’s coming he has literally ushered in and inaugurated the “last days.” By his incarnation and life, supremely his death, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost, God’s promised plan of salvation has been accomplished, and now we await and anticipate the consummation of that plan in the glorious appearing of the King of kings and the Lord of lords (see Eph 1:9-10; Phil 2:6-11; Rev 4-5; 19:1-21). When eschatology is presented in this way, not only is it true to the Scripture, it is also able to move us to action, obedience, worship, and service. Such eschatology will never leave us merely satisfied with this world, but it will orient us towards the future where the church will rightly learn to cry afresh with the church of all ages, “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev 22:20). May this issue of *SBJT*, even though diverse views are expressed and not all the contributors agree, lead us in some small way to this end.