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P A P E R S
towards a biblical mind

Eschatology and politics:

the last things we want to talk about?

by Geoffrey Penn

The Christian account of history is eschatological not only in the sense that it comes to a definitive and everlasting end, but in the sense that the end is a glorified beginning, not merely a return to origins. Peter Leithart¹

To expect a transformation of society that results from changed people is not an idealistic hope that can never come to pass; it is a matter of historical record. Herbert Schlossberg²

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Summary

Christians fail to do justice to 'politics' when they seek to withdraw from the political arena or to use political power to dominate society. Similarly, Christians misunderstand 'eschatology' when they obsessively focus on debates about end-times chronology and when they effectively ignore it altogether. In each case, the purpose of biblical eschatology – critique, hope and a re-ordering of everyday priorities and relationships – and hence the political implications of God's coming and present kingdom, are neglected. A broader understanding of politics and eschatology contends that everything we do is significant in the sight of God and in the light of the future.

Introduction

Recently 'politics' has meant an ongoing global economic crisis, dramatic changes in the fortunes of UK political parties and the scandal surrounding MPs' abuse of expenses. Dramas of the general election campaign, including the innovation of three televised 'Prime Ministerial debates', engaged the nation and even slightly boosted voter turnout. Churches across the country hosted hustings, conducted seminars on policy differences, listened to sermons on the importance of voting, and prayed for 'all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way'.³ However, 'eschatology' was something of a poor relation. Relegated to the final pages in works of systematic theology, it did not feature in the 'Big Conversation' or influence many voters. Maybe that was no bad thing. After all, isn't eschatology all about escaping and transcending the murky dealings of the world – Rapture, Millennium, Armageddon and the state of Israel?

Yet politics is about more than elections and eschatology about more than speculation over future events. Christians around the world face various political challenges, including persecution (e.g. Pakistani Christians accused of the crime of apostasy from Islam or blasphemy against Mohammed) and power struggles (e.g. Ugandan Christians voting on criminal penalties for homosexual behaviour). However, these examples risk isolating our everyday relationships from the realm of the 'political' and limiting politics in ways the Bible's language and framework do not allow. As we shall see, 'politics' incorporates broad concerns about relationships and power, and who wields it. Likewise, eschatology embraces NT interest in the day of the Lord, the kingdom of God, hope, and Christian identity and conduct in the light of that hope – all rooted in OT teaching on the future. A moment's reflection on everyday life reveals that a future orientation lies behind almost every decision a person makes, Christian or not. As philosophers like John Gray have noted, some sort of eschatology, however shadowy, secular, unarticulated or inconsistent, dominates how people live. Any serious Christian eschatology will lead us to reflect on what the future has to say to the present, and what our responsibilities are as disciples looking forward to the Master's return.

1 Peter Leithart, *Deep Comedy: Trinity, Tragedy and Hope in Western Literature*, Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2006, p.xi.

2 Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: Christian Faith and Its Confrontation with American Society*, Wheaton: Crossway, 1983, p.325.

3 1 Tim. 2:2 (ESV).

Eschatology: longer than we think

Eschatology is literally 'words about the end'. The Bible says much about this as God progressively revealed himself through history, the prophets' critique of Israel's failings, and the coming of the promised King.⁴ Promise is the key word: a promise both orients its recipients to the future and reminds them of the grace of the promise-maker. From Genesis to Malachi God's words of promise comforted his people, warned of judgement and called forth holy living.

Adam and Eve received such a promise even in the depths of their shame as sinners in the presence of their Creator: God told the snake that the offspring of Eve 'will crush your head, and you will strike his heel'.⁵ The covenant with Abraham is in the form of promises that call forth obedience: 'I will make you into a great nation...' so 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go...'.⁶ At Sinai, in the most detailed covenant, Yahweh's identity as sovereign and proven saviour is the bedrock (Exodus 19:3-4; 20:2) but the people are always pointed towards the future, and what Yahweh will accomplish.⁷ The goal, ratified in Deuteronomy, is God's people living life to the full, in holiness, enjoying God's blessing.⁸ The prophets, who repeatedly announce judgement on covenant-breakers, make God's promises of future salvation even more explicit, indicating a glorious future that gives hope to and inspires obedience from the covenant people. The amazing imagery of blessing and judgement – twin poles of covenant promise – bursts the bounds of historical fulfilment, and rests upon decisive acts of God, not human effort or natural development. It is also strikingly 'political' in its flavour:

In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains... and all nations will stream to it... He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares...⁹

The full revelation of God in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth inaugurates that 'day of the LORD' long-anticipated by the prophets.¹⁰ Throughout Acts the apostles draw on prophetic eschatology and assert that it was beginning to be fulfilled in their lifetimes because of the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.¹¹ The letter to the Hebrews explicitly places all who live after the Messiah's coming 'in these last days' that the prophets anticipated. Scholars across the theological spectrum increasingly note that Jesus' teaching about and establishing of 'the Kingdom of God was not just about religion and ethics, but about eschatology and politics, and the theology which holds them all together'.¹² There is an unimaginably glorious future to come, when injustice will cease, death will be swallowed up in victory, and God will make all things new.¹³ But as we wait for that 'appearing of our great God and saviour Jesus Christ' we do so as people 'on whom the end of the ages has come', and both the inaugurated Kingdom and the blessed hope call for our complete transformation.¹⁴ Jesus directly compares the organisation, relations and power dynamics of the Christian community to that of pagan political communities, in the light of the present redemptive mission of the Son of Man.¹⁵ The eschatological present is here and its implications go way beyond the 'spiritual', embracing our physical, political existence.

Politics: broader than we realise

At the start of the seventeenth century, Johannes Althusius, a German Calvinist, began his magnum opus by claiming: 'Politics is the art of associating men for the purpose of establishing, cultivating, and conserving social life among them.'¹⁶ He proceeded to elaborate and defend the necessary interdependence of many social groups, from the family, through voluntary associations, right up to the state, and to articulate resistance to centralizing and imperial forces. Those forces, particularly in the shape of the Holy Roman Empire, posed an ideological and existential challenge to the small city-states of Althusius' day. Two thousand years earlier, Aristotle's *Politics* had defined man as 'by nature a political animal' (*zoon politikon*), who, through pressure of survival necessity and the draw of mutual benefit, forms associations (*koinonia*) to promote good purposes, the highest of which is the state (*polis*).¹⁷ Most political theory accepts the claim that the (secular) state is the highest form of political community and seeks to define it in the best way, but we should pause over Althusius' insight, entirely consonant with Aristotle's foundations, that politics is the 'art of associating men for the purpose of... social life among them.'

Consider how the New Testament uses political language, particularly in Philippians and Hebrews. Philippi was a city of retired Roman legionaries, self-consciously bound (as a 'colony' of Rome) to the imperial capital and her ideology. Paul's letter to the church there uses this 'political' terminology, though many translations efface this.¹⁸ 'Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' (Philippians 1:27). The main verb of the sentence is *politeuesthai*, 'to live as a [good] citizen', not merely of whatever earthly polity the reader inhabits, but as a citizen of the heavenly *polis*.¹⁹ Paul deliberately uses this 'political' language to challenge the secular usage of the concept.²⁰ He reminds the Philippians, who were acutely aware of their secular political identity and privileges, that their heavenly political identity and privileges are far more important: 'but our citizenship (*politeuma*) is in heaven and we eagerly await a saviour from there...' (3:20).²¹ The letter to the Hebrews prunes away attachment to earthly political entities by examining willingness to live as pilgrims characteristic of Abraham (11:10) and other heroes of faith (11:16) in the light of the city (*polis*) with foundations that God has prepared. The readers are called to political suffering, 'outside the camp... for here we do not have an enduring city' (13:14), and their present experience of worship is described as presence in 'the city of the living God' (12:22) as they receive the 'kingdom that cannot be shaken' (12:29). To people dominated by idolatrous Rome, which claimed to be the ultimate city – invincible, the only state that could guarantee peace, the truly self-sufficient *polis* (self-sufficiency is a cornerstone and goal of Aristotelian politics) – the apostolic church proclaimed a better city.²² This city, not Rome or earthly Jerusalem, was the locus of peace, divine favour and salvation. Its citizens had rights and responsibilities, ways of behaving, boundary-markers and fundamental identities that were to trump any earthly politics.

Passages in which the language of 'politics' is applied to the Christian community not only teach us about life now, but are also strongly flavoured with eschatology. Perseverance in living as citizens worthy of the gospel (Philippians 1:27) is a double-edged sign of eschatological judgement: to opponents it means coming destruction; to God's people, coming salvation (1:28). Citizenship in heaven (3:20) means a life of standing firm, embracing what is good, and embracing those brothers and sisters with whom we disagree (4:1-19) as 'we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ' whose power 'enables him to bring everything under his

4 For a rounded treatment of biblical eschatology, see the superb popular introduction by Graham Beynon, *Last Things First: Living in the Light of the Future*, Nottingham: IVP, 2010.

5 Gen. 3:15 (This and subsequent Bible quotations are taken from the NIV).

6 Gen. 12:1-4. Cf. later formulations of the covenant in Gen. 15 (promises, vv.4-21; human response, v.1) and Gen. 17 (promises, vv.1-8, 15-19; human response, vv.9-14).

7 Exod. 19:5; 20:6,12; 23:20-33.

8 This paragraph is not an attempt to sum up the exceedingly rich theology of the covenant, merely a reminder of how the future is a vital dimension to that theology. See, e.g., W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002; Meredith Kline, *The Treaty of the Great King*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963.

9 Isa. 2:1-4. Cf. Isa. 9:1-7; 11:1-12:6; 25:1-27:9; Isa. 60-66 *passim*. See also Ezek. 34:11-24 and Mal. 4:1-6.

10 Reading from Isa. 61, in Luke 4:21, Jesus announced, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'

11 E.g. Joel in Acts 2:17-21 and Amos in Acts 15:15-18.

12 N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, London: SPCK, p.51. Also John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd edn., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, esp. chs. 1, 2, 7 and 8; Craig Bartholomew et al., eds, *A Royal Priesthood: The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically. A Dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002.

13 1 Cor. 15; 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11; Rev. 21-22; Matt. 25:31-46, etc.

14 1 Cor. 10:11; Titus 2:11-14.

15 Mark 10:42-45.

16 Quoted in Jeremy Ive, 'Relationships in the Christian Tradition', in Michael Schluter & John Ashcroft, eds, *Jubilee Manifesto: A Framework, Agenda and Strategy for Christian Social Reform*, Leicester: IVP, 2005, p.61.

17 Aristotle, *The Politics*, rev. edn., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992, pp.54-61 [1252a1-1253a29].

18 For a more detailed version of this argument see Peter Leithart, *Against Christianity*, Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2000, pp.27-31.

19 Gerald Hawthorne, *Philippians, Word Biblical Commentary 43*, Waco: Word, 1983.

20 Gordon Fee, *Philippians* (NICNT); see also Peter O'Brien, *Philippians* (NIGTC).

21 Cf. Eph. 2:12, 19, which uses 'political' language to underline the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God.

22 John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom*, London: SPCK, 2005; see also N. T. Wright's chapter on reading Romans in Bartholomew et al., *A Royal Priesthood*. A more cautious approach to this theme is found in the works of Seyoon Kim and John Barclay.

control' (3:30–21). Hebrews 12:28–13:25 gives instructions on worship and corporate life now on the basis of what is to come – God's judgement and the complete, undivided experience of enjoying heavenly citizenship.

The gospel announces that God's King has come and will come again. Those who trust in him are remade through the Holy Spirit's power with a new identity, expressed in 'political' language, and are called to live transformed lives. The ethical/moral teachings of the New Testament are political: they concern relationships within the church, an outpost of the heavenly city. In other words, they are to do with the art of associating people (Althusius) in the highest form of association (Aristotle), which is the church. This involves relativising the idolatrous pretensions and demands of other political entities, in particular the (imperial) state. When Jesus said 'My kingdom is not of this world' he did not mean that his kingdom takes no physical form, but that it differs from the world's kingdoms in its origin (from God), its goals (*true* worship free from idolatry, *true* harmony in diversity) and its methods (no violence, but victory through *suffering*).²³

Eschatology, like everything else, matters

The primary application of the political dimension of biblical eschatology is in the church, as Christians live transformed lives alongside one another – forgiving one another, bearing with one another, giving and lending extravagantly to those in need, embracing and welcoming the awkward and the outcast.²⁴ In these ways, and through our suffering for the sake of the gospel, the political demands of heavenly citizenship are fulfilled in God's people as we seek the city that is to come.²⁵ But what about our interactions in the political realm as the world defines it?

No Christian, whether a US senator or an 'untouchable' slum-dweller in Mumbai, has a lasting city here; all seek the city that is to come. Historically and across the world today, the political dimension of life for many Christians consists largely of experiencing persecution. Both the beggar and the politician are secure in their heavenly citizenship, with the Holy Spirit working through them and their local church to transform lives and relationships (all aspects of inaugurated eschatology). From this foundation for their lives, both are called to the humanly-impossible task of loving their neighbour, whether that neighbour is acting as a persecuting enemy or not.²⁶ Furthermore, God's people are liberated from the need to seek revenge by the certainty of future eschatological judgement, and are liberated to 'do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers'²⁷ by the hope of eschatological blessing. Whether at any given time that means loving our neighbours through expressing forgiveness and proclaiming Christ under severe persecution, or through using time and gifts in reforming less-than-adequate worldly political systems, will depend on the mix of talents and opportunities God gives us. The eschatological future does not give us a precise mandate for action now but, as 1 Thessalonians 1:3 reminds us, Christian hope sustains the love and faith that produce all sorts of costly good works.²⁸

Future eschatology also means Christian hope is ultimately for embodied life in a renewed physical creation, of which the firstfruits is the resurrection of Jesus.²⁹ There is significant continuity between the body of Jesus before his crucifixion and his resurrection body, even if its precise nature is finally mysterious to us. The body that is sown perishable and in dishonour is the body that is raised imperishable and glorious.³⁰ In the marvellous salvation providence of God, even the results of human evil – the marks in our Lord's hands, feet and side – are taken up into the new creation, transformed for the glory of God.³¹ This continuity implies that all we do matters 'for we

know that our labour in the Lord is not in vain'³² – as do the NT affirmations of judgement according to works, the purification of our actions (burned up like straw or refined like gold or precious stones), our intimate knowledge of God and he of us, and our everlasting praise in response to God's grace and mighty acts.³³

Interlude: has the Millennium contributed anything?

Having discussed what ought to be common to all Christian eschatologies, we can now address a key area of difference among evangelical eschatologies, the question of the thousand-year period spoken of in Revelation 20 (vv.1–7) before the final judgement (vv.9–15), during which Satan is 'bound', thrown 'into the Abyss' and kept from 'deceiving the nations any more' (vv.2–3). Broadly speaking, millennial theologies divide into three camps: amillennialism, postmillennialism and premillennialism, with further subdivision of the premillennial school into 'historic' and 'dispensational' varieties.³⁴ Differences over how one interprets and evaluates history as Jesus' return approaches has often been even more marked: premillennialists tend to be pessimistic, postmillennialists optimistic, and amillennialists undecided.³⁵

Millennial beliefs have undoubtedly had an impact on many Christians' decisions regarding direct involvement in secular politics. The radical prophetic and pessimistic sermons of Edward Irving sparked the renewal of premillennialism in the 1820s, and caused many evangelicals to retreat as far as they could from politics, in which they had previously been heavily engaged.³⁶ Charles Darwin's mentor, John Stevens Henslow, clergyman and Cambridge professor of mineralogy, almost suffered a nervous breakdown as he struggled to reconcile his Whiggish reforming impulses with the seductive ardour of Irving's premillennialism. For a while his commitment to the cause of abolishing slavery hung in the balance.³⁷ Many premillennialists who believed that the return of Christ was imminent also advocated an approach to missionary work that affected Christian and secular political engagement. Thus SIM missionary G. W. Brooke in Sudan in 1887 wrote:

I see no hope given in the Bible that wickedness in this world will be subdued by civilisation or preaching of the gospel – until the Messiah the prince come. And to hasten that time is... the function of foreign missions... I therefore should be inclined to frame any missionary plans with a view to giving a simple gospel message to the greatest number possible of ignorant heathen in the shortest possible time.³⁸

A. A. Hodge commented that missionaries inspired by this theology aimed only at the conversion of individuals, with no thought to planting Christian institutions that would 'in time, develop according to the genius of the nationalities'.³⁹

However, many notable premillennialists have played an active role in secular politics. In Britain, the seventh Lord Shaftesbury (1801–1885), who took a lively interest in prophecy conferences, led reform of factory conditions, treatment of the mentally ill, and many more causes. He was inspired to urgent social action by a blend of acute awareness of judgement at the return of Christ and old-fashioned aristocratic paternalism.⁴⁰ The revivalist Baptist William G. Riley spoke for a significant minority of turn-of-the-century American premillennialists when he cried 'The Church of God is

23 John 18:36–37.
24 Matt. 18:21–22; Eph. 4:32; Rom. 15:1; 2 Cor. 8:2; Luke 6:34–35; Luke 14:12–14; Jas. 2:1–9, etc.
25 Heb. 13:14.
26 Matt. 5:43–48; Luke 10:27–37; Rom. 12:18–21.
27 Gal. 6:7–10; cf. the parable of the unjust steward in Luke 16.
28 See Tim Chester's wide-ranging study, *Mission and the Coming of God: Eschatology, the Trinity and Mission in the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann and Contemporary Evangelicalism*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 2006.
29 Rom. 8:18–25; 1 Cor. 15:20–23.
30 1 Cor. 15:42ff.
31 Darrell Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 2006, p.59 and *passim*.

32 1 Cor. 15:58; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Cor. 3:12–15; Rev. 22:3–5. Against the frequently-heard claim that 2 Pet. 3 teaches the utter destruction of the present universe, see Jonathan Moo, 'Continuity, Discontinuity and Hope: The Contribution of New Testament Eschatology to a Distinctively Christian Environmental Ethos', *Tyndale Bulletin* 61:1, 2010, pp.21–44. More briefly, see John Piper, *Future Grace*, Leicester: IVP, 1995, pp.373–79.
33 David Field, 'Not the Least Lash Lost' (2007), online at <http://davidpfield.com/other/AAPC2-3lecture.pdf>
34 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Leicester: IVP, 1994, pp.1109–39, gives a more thorough exposition and argues for the historic premillennial perspective.
35 Stanley M. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options*, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1992, helpfully analyses the distinctive strengths and weaknesses contributed by each millennial position.
36 Mark Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitfield and the Wesleys*, Leicester: IVP, 2004, pp.221–47.
37 Adrian Desmond & James Moore, *Darwin's Sacred Cause: Race, Slavery and the Quest for Human Origins*, London: Allen Lane, 2009, pp.56–7.
38 Quoted by Andrew Porter, 'An Overview, 1700–1914', in Norman Etherington, ed., *Missions and Empire*, Oxford: OUP, 2005, p.55.
39 See Murray, *Puritan Hope*, pp.204–05.
40 Richard Turnbull, *Shaftesbury: The Great Reformer*, Oxford: Lion, 2010, pp.219–23.

especially charged with civic reform!’ and urged evangelicals to ‘work for democracy, elect reformers to civic office, and fight to eliminate all civic vices, especially liquor.’⁴¹ Millions of premillennialist evangelicals in the US today are heavily engaged in worldly politics at county, state and federal level, from immigration and taxation policy to the availability of abortions.⁴²

All those exceptions prove that the rule – ‘premillennialists withdraw from politics’ – is often invalid. In any event, even if one held a consistent and thoroughly pessimistic historical eschatology, along with a strong belief in the imminent return of Christ, that would not require withdrawal from every attempt to ameliorate social or political evil. Such a withdrawal would have to rest on an entirely separate judgement about the demands of love in practice and the chances of ‘success’ in a particular area. Pessimistic premillennialists do not refuse to work, or to get involved with settling disputes. They do not refuse their pay cheques or reject the use of seatbelts! Each of these things has a bearing on wider political life, and Christians have an interest in those things being done honestly and well. There is no way to separate oneself from ‘political’ or ‘social’ concerns that are allegedly a distraction from the gospel, since all that we do is of social and political significance. As Richard Mouw astutely argues in *Politics and the Biblical Drama*,

since we can never be certain that we live immediately prior to the return of Christ, we can never be certain to what extent society is immune to change. More importantly, the fact that little or no change is conceivable does not release us from the divine mandate, nor our calling to be faithful to the heavenly vision, a vision in which Christ’s atoning work redeems all of life.⁴³

Correspondingly, when it comes to the moment of decision concerning any particular political or social engagement, optimistic long-termist postmillennialists do not know whether the project will turn out to be a ‘success’ or a ‘failure’. Their postmillennialism does not indicate how much time and energy to spend on which social/political causes. As in theory, so in history: postmillennialism did not last as a thoroughly evangelical framework for life and Christian engagement with the world. During the nineteenth century, largely because it invested so much in improvement of the world (‘improvements’ that were subject to conflicting interpretations), biblical postmillennialism degenerated into a vague secular optimism.⁴⁴ Ironically, the rise of secularism and the apparent failure of postmillennialism to produce truly lasting Christianization probably encouraged many evangelicals to start interpreting history pessimistically, which in turn increased the attraction of premillennial schemes that provided a rationale and explanatory framework for the apparent surrounding social ‘decline’.⁴⁵

41 George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925*, Oxford: OUP, 1980, pp.128–31. There is not space to discuss the important and related role played by providentialism (the belief that God is particularly blessing and guiding this nation in this direction right now) in British and American intellectual history.

42 Hostile accounts are found in Sara Diamond, *Not By Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right*, London: Guilford, 1998; and four essays by Frederick Clarkson that comprise his ‘Christian Reconstructionism’, *Public Eye Magazine*, 1994, online at www.publiceye.org/magazine/v08n1/chrisrec.html

43 As summarized by Chester in *Mission and the Coming of God*, p.171.

44 David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody*, Leicester: IVP, 2005, pp.130–32.

45 Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, pp.54–55, 70.

Christian Zionism: a peculiar politics

While most eschatological belief systems have less impact on political engagement than we might expect, and few logically issue in any precise programmes, there is one that is currently popular and tightly bound to a particular active political programme. Some dispensational premillennialists give a ready ear and ready cash to (usually American) televangelists and parachurch movements calling for aid to Jews seeking to emigrate to Israel, and to various charitable bodies operating there. They are also strident in their political lobbying, seeking to ensure that pro-Israel politicians are elected to office and ensure that the US government supports Israel. Quite apart from the dubious theology that this rests on,⁴⁶ this brand of eschatology should not imply that ‘supporting’ Israel means unequivocal endorsement of every aggressive posture or manoeuvre by the Jewish state, especially as OT prophets regularly denounced the violence of Israel’s leaders. Furthermore, it is far from clear that aggressive policies of settlement, land seizure and discrimination are actually in the long-term interests of the Zionist cause, however strong Israel appears to be in relation to the Arab states today. Christians must not contribute to this issue by simplistic and one-sided policy extrapolations from an eccentric eschatology.

Conclusion

Eschatology is neither remote nor esoteric, but is highly relevant to Christian living. The ‘last days’ are here, the Messiah is reigning now at the right hand of God the Father, and Christians are to pray (as Jesus famously taught his disciples) for God’s will to be done right here, right now. The glory of God’s future kingdom critiques all our efforts but spurs us ever on to work out our obedience in all areas of life.⁴⁷ Equally, politics is not just for politicians. Worldly politics influences our lives whether we like it or not, and Christian politics (i.e. rich church life) has repercussions way beyond the church as, together, we are the light of the world, a city on a hill (Matthew 6:14–16). Be inspired that your labour in the Lord is not in vain, and that how you conduct your relationships and wield the influence God has granted you truly matters both now and in the everlasting future. The disputed details of millennial schemes should not deflect us. The agreed contours of eschatology, including the certainty of final judgement, should shape our political engagement. This means thoroughly living out the church’s life and mission here as outpost of the heavenly city since the ‘primary social structure through which the gospel works to change other structures is that of the Christian community.’⁴⁸ It also means loving our neighbours by contributing to wider political communities and to government with love and justice, as God gives us the talents and opportunities to do so.

46 Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road Map to Armageddon*, IVP, 2004; David Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?*, Eerdmans, 2003; Peter Walker, ‘Centre Stage: Jerusalem or Jesus?’, *Cambridge Papers*, Vol.5, No.1, 1996.

47 Richard Baukham, *The Bible in Politics: Reading the Bible Politically*, London: SPCK, 1989, p.150.

48 Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, p.154.

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