

## TRENDS IN EVANGELICAL CONCEPTION OF CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY

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### **Abstract**

This study examined the various views of Christian eschatology within Evangelicalism. Through a theological inquiry, the present research probed the divergent opinions on some itemized sub-events of Christian eschatology within Evangelicalism. These sub-events bothered on the death, the *parousia*, millennium, resurrection, judgment, and rapture. The study reveals that there is no general agreement on each of these sub-events of eschatology within Evangelicalism. Although the divergent opinions on each of these sub-events of Christian eschatology show the tolerance and flexibility of thoughts within Evangelicalism, the present study highlights the adverse effects such different views could bring. Accordingly, the present study calls for more unifying studies on the various sub-events of Christian eschatology within Evangelicalism. The success of these unifying studies will help sustain the high view of the centrality of the Christ-event (the *parousia* and its associated activities) within Evangelical eschatological considerations.

**Keywords:** Evangelicalism, Christian eschatology, *Parousia*, Rapture, Judgment

### **Introduction**

While the belief that this earth will reach an end and be replenished by God is central to the system of belief of most Christian traditions, opinions differ on the timing and nature of the individual events that will ultimately culminate into the final hours of the earth. In Evangelicalism, for example, divergent views exist on nearly all sub-events of Christian eschatology. Most importantly, the nature of the Christ-event, the sequence of the sub-events, as well as information on the exact character of the sub-events, all point of contention within Evangelicalism. Using theological inquiry, the present study probes the various divergent views about Christian eschatology that exist within Evangelicalism. The central argument is that while consensus is yet to be

built on some significant eschatological events among Evangelicalism, the belief that the Christ-event will bring an end to this earth is certain. What are needed are more unifying studies on the sub-events of eschatology. These studies should target bridging the gap of divergent views on this important topic of Christian theology among Evangelicalism.

### **Evangelicalism**

Evangelicalism derived its name from the Greek word *εὐαγγέλιον* (*euangelion*). *εὐαγγέλιον* translated as "good news/gospel" in English. First used in publication by William Tyndale in 1531, the term has had different meanings through succeeding centuries. In its earliest development, the term referred to the central message of Jesus and the apostles as well as the entire books of the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> During the Reformation, the reformers used the term widely to identify their churches from the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>2</sup> In recent times, the term refers to the gospel, some mainline Christian denominations within Protestantism, and missionary programs of some denominations within Protestantism. Accordingly, Evangelicalism refers to a significant strand within Protestant Christianity that emphasizes some doctrines as central components of the Christian message- the gospel. Principal among these doctrines is belief that salvation is accessed through faith and by the grace of the Christ-event; belief in the on-going sanctifying activity of the Holy Spirit; belief in the Bible as the sole authority in deciding all matters of faith; and belief that missionary activity is a divine responsibility laid on every Christian.<sup>3</sup>

Some movements within Protestantism are generally regarded as precursors of the Evangelical movement. These movements are Pietism, Presbyterianism, Puritanism, and High Church Anglicanism.<sup>4</sup> The Pietist's tradition underlines the fervor for Christian discipline among Evangelicals.<sup>5</sup> From the Presbyterian heritage, Evangelicalism developed an interest in maintaining core teachings of Protestant Christianity, continuous observance of the Communion, and missionary activity.<sup>6</sup> The Puritan heritage influenced Evangelicals to place a high value on the study of God's word and conversion as a primary requirement for belonging to the Christian Church.<sup>7</sup> The desire to maintain the standards and ethos of early Christianity was a mark left on Evangelicalism by the High Church Anglicanism.<sup>8</sup>

The Evangelical movement was born out of series of great revivals during the 1730s. The spread of these spiritual renewals mainly in America and Europe has generally been described as the First Great

Awakening. During this awakening, Christian believers shared their faith with others enthusiastically. Foremost among these were Jonathan Edwards, Aaron Burr, Sr., Gilbert Tennent, Howell Harris, and Daniel Rowland. Later, the religious activities of George Whitefield, Charles Wesley, John Wesley, and August Gottlieb Spangenberg, among others, fanned the flame of these revivals.

These great revivals led to extensive missionary activities in the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> This period has been referred to as the Second Great Awakening. Beginning from 1790, the efforts of these Christian revivalists produced massive increases in membership growth in the Churches. Charles Grandison Finney, William Wilberforce, John Nelson Darby, and Cyrus Scofield contributed in various ways and different geographical locations to the spread of the missionary and revival activities during this period. The religious efforts of Charles Spurgeon, Dwight L. Moody, Charles Hodge, Archibald Alexander, and B. B. Warfield ensured that the enthusiasm of spiritual renewal and missionary activities would continue to ensuing centuries.

Though the Evangelical movement attained much success in their quest for spiritual renewal in the early part of the twentieth century, various strands of religious thoughts developed within the movement in the better part of the century. The rejection of liberal Christian theological views in 1910 appears to have started these internal misunderstandings. The crux of the internal confusion was on the relationship between the Christian Church and culture. While some opted for complete disengagement with the prevailing culture, others argued for a meaningful engagement with the prevailing culture. Consequently, a split occurred in the movement. Advocates for complete disengagement with popular culture became distinctively known as Fundamentals, and those who sought meaningful engagement with popular culture bore the name Evangelicals.<sup>10</sup> The efforts of Harold Ockenga were very pivotal in this split. Eventually, the Christian activities of Billy Graham, John Stott, Martin Lloyd-Jones and others like them widened the gap between Fundamentals and Evangelicals. At the latter part of the twentieth century, several recognizable groupings appeared within Evangelicals. These groups included the ecumenical movement, the Penteco-charismatic movement, and the emerging church movement.

In recent times, four main streams are observed within Evangelicalism. These are confessional Evangelicals, revivalist Evangelicals, progressive Evangelicals, and generic Evangelicals. Confessional Evangelicals maintain continuity with the convictions and

activities of the Protestant Reformation. They rely heavily on authoritative statements of Christian religious faith as a means of shielding themselves from Christian liberal views. Unlike confessional Evangelicals, revivalist Evangelicals do not focus on religious creeds. Instead, they stress spiritual renewal as well as personal godliness.<sup>11</sup> Generic Evangelicals strategically avoid aligning with any stream within Evangelicalism. Though they appear conservative in Christian theological and social matters, generic Evangelicals present themselves as nondenominational. This aids them to widen their appeal to both Christian believers and non-believers.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of this diversity within Evangelicalism, there are recognizable traits common to all of these streams.<sup>13</sup> Generally, Evangelicals regard the Bible as the sole means of authority in Christianity. As such, they hold that there is no error in the original manuscripts of the Bible.<sup>14</sup> Also, Evangelicals emphasize the continuous spiritual development of the believer.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, they expect every believer to cooperate with the Holy Spirit to grow into the 'born again' life. Also, Evangelicals hold that the salvific work of Christ is the only means of salvation for humanity.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, they expect all believers to have faith in the grace and mercies of God. Further, Evangelicals express active interests in outreach.<sup>17</sup> They believe that the second coming of Christ and its related bliss is the particular solution of the problems of the Earth. Thus they engage in intense outreach programs to 'win' believers and non-believers to the kingdom of God.

### **Christian Eschatology**

The English term 'eschatology' is derived from two Greek words- 'ἔσχατος' (last/utmost/final) and 'λόγος' (logos; "word, study, reason").<sup>18</sup> Together, these Greek words refer to the study of the final events or "last things" in the last history of humanity.<sup>19</sup> It is based on the Christian meta-narrative that indicates that the unfolding of God's plans in the final history of humanity, through Christ, will determine the end of the world-the Christ-event.<sup>20</sup> Sub-themes within Christian eschatology include death, Christ's return, the Millennium, resurrection, judgment, and rapture.

The notion of the New Testament authors concerning God's activities in the final history of the earth (Acts 2:20; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:2; 2 Pet 3:10) cast further light on the Old Testament authors' perspectives on the "day of the Lord" (Joel 1:15; 2: 31; Isa 2:12; 7:18-25; Ezek 13: 5; Amos 5:18, 20; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:7-14; Zach 14:1; Mal 4:5). The notion of the "day of the Lord," in the Old Testament, carried a double meaning. First, it described God's act of judgment on nations,

people, and individuals who were guilty of "political or moral" evil.<sup>21</sup> Second, it described a futuristic event in which God shall judge all people, nations, and individuals. In this judgment, God will destroy the wicked but He will reward the just (Isa 13:11; Pro 11:21; 10:16; 16:4; Matt 25:41, 46; 2 Pet 2:9; Rev 22:11-12).

The New Testament authors' idea of the "blessed hope" emphasized the second implication of the "day of the Lord" more than its first implication (1 Cor 15:19; 2 Pet 3:13; Titus 2:13; Rom 8:18; 2 Thess 2:18; Heb 9:28; 2 Pet 1:1; Jude 21). The idea of the "blessed hope" describes the perennial anticipation of God's reign on earth. In pursuit of this hope, New Testament authors counseled Christian believers to live godly lifestyles in the here-and-now (1 Cor 4:9). That was the only means by which these believers will be part of God's kingdom (2 Pet 1:4; Eph 4:13, 24; Heb 12:10; 2 Pet 2:20; James 1:27).

## **Current Evangelical Thoughts on Eschatological Themes**

### **Death**

Physical death has generally been defined as the "permanent termination" of the life of an "organism."<sup>22</sup> As a consequence of aging, accident, conflict, poor health, and malnutrition, physical death is an everyday reality among humanity (Gen 3:19; 2 Sam 14:14; Eccl 3:2; Heb 9:27). Apart from the biblical depiction of the physical translation of Enoch and Elijah (Heb 11:5; Gen 5:24; 2 Kings 2:11), evidence from the Bible indicates that death is a universal phenomenon (Heb 9:27). In the scripture, physical death severs the spirit from the body (Eccl 12:7; Matt 10:28). After the severance, the body returns to the ground, and the spirit goes back to God, the giver (Gen 2:7; 3: 19). In the *eschaton*, the Bible indicates that physical death (during the resurrection unto death) will be the punishment of the impenitent (Rev 21:8; John 5:28, 29; Rev 20:6). But before the second death occurs, Evangelicals do not share a standard view on the '*zwischenzustand*,' ("intermediate state"). The "intermediate state" describes the condition of the deceased between the period of physical death and the resurrection.<sup>23</sup> Attempts to describe events during this state have produced theories such as soul sleep, purgatory, instantaneous resurrection, and immediate ascension to heaven or descending to hell. The theory of soul sleep maintains that the dead are in a state of "temporary unconsciousness" awaiting the "resurrection."<sup>24</sup> The "purgatory" theory insists on a designated place, between heaven and hell, where the deceased is purified to be 'fit' to stand before the creator.<sup>25</sup> The

theory of instantaneous resurrection argues that the dead receives a resurrected body at the instance of death. This body is 'hidden' in God but released at the resurrection.<sup>26</sup> The theory of instantaneous ascension to heaven or descending to hell argues that while the spirits of righteous-deceased soar to heaven immediately at death to await the first resurrection, those of the unrepentant go down to hell to expect the second resurrection.<sup>27</sup>

From these theories, one can infer that each is inconsistent with one scriptural passage or the other. One general agreement in all of these views is the notion that life continues in one form or another after physical death has occurred. This is a general flaw on the face of biblical teachings on death and the condition of the deceased. In line with right interpretation of Scripture, one gets the conviction that physical death temporally terminates one's life until the resurrection (John 11:11-14; Luke 16:19-31; Ps 115:17; 146:4; Eccl 9:10; Ezek 18:20).

### **The Parousia**

The second advent of Jesus is a central teaching in the Bible (Acts 1:11; 1 Thess 4:16; Rev 22:12). Upon the evidence of Scripture, there is an overarching view that Jesus' return is unknown (Matt 24:36), personal, bodily, universally visible (Acts 1:11; Rev 1:7; 1 Thess 4:16; Matt 24:30), sudden and unexpected for unbelievers (1 Thess 5:2-6; Matt 16:27), audible (1 Thess 4:16; Matt 24: 31), and glorious (Matt 24:23; 24:27; 24:28). There is also a general agreement among Evangelicals that Jesus shall return both as judge and deliverer (Mark 13; Luke 21; Matt 24:22, 30, 51; Matt 25: 10-12, 41, 46). However, the manner in which Christ shall return has been disputed among Evangelicals. Two key viewpoints in this debate are the imminent viewpoint and the delayed viewpoint. The former view holds that Jesus' return can take place in the course of humanity's existence (Matt 24:42-40; Luke 12:40; 1 Pet 4:7; Rev 22:12).

The latter view holds that all the "signs" indicated in the Scripture need to occur before Jesus returns to this earth. Major signs emphasized by this viewpoint include general physical signs (Matt 24:4-14), the universal proclamation of the gospel (Matt 24:14), intense and dire persecution, both within and without God's church (Matt 24:21), the appearance of the "man of sin" (2 Thess 2:3), and the holistic salvation of "all Israel" (Rom 11: 25-32). Though attempts have been made among Evangelicals to settle the seeming tension between the imminent passages and the delay passages in the Bible, a satisfactory reconciliation of these passages is yet to be achieved.<sup>28</sup>

### Nature of the Millennium

From the Latin "mille" (thousand) and "annum" (year), the English term "millennium" describes one-thousand years.<sup>29</sup> Though the term is not found in scripture, its meaning is mentioned six times in Scripture (Rev 20:2-7). The period is specified about the kingdom of God, the day of the Lord, and the reign of the Messiah (Rev 20:1-10). Four essential positions have been offered in an attempt to understand the meaning of the period. Postmillennialism is one of such views. Postmillennialists believe that the period is a figurative reference to a thousand-year period of global peace, equality, and godliness that will ensue before the *parousia*.<sup>30</sup> According to this view, the reign of Jesus in heaven runs concurrently with this period of unsurpassed peace on earth. Jesus will return to the earth after His "spiritual" reign of one-thousand years in heaven is over.<sup>31</sup>

Another position, premillennialism, argues that the *parousia* will begin a physical and earthly reign of Jesus on earth.<sup>32</sup> However, contention exists among the exponents of this view concerning the place of the nation of Israel during this time. While historic premillennialists maintain that many Jews will be part of the redeemed, dispensational premillennialists believe that the nation of Israel will inherit the Abrahamic promise at this time (Gen 12:1-3; 15:18-21).<sup>33</sup>

In contrast to these two positions, amillennialism denies that a period of one-thousand years of peace will occur either to usher in the *parousia* or after the *parousia*.<sup>34</sup> Amillennialists estimate that one-thousand years is a symbol of the spiritual reign of Jesus over the regenerated. Exponents maintain that Jesus' ongoing reign began after His ascension. A relatively recent position is *praeterism*. From the Latin "*praeter*" ("past/beyond"), the *praeterist* position holds that either all or some prophecies have been fulfilled during the Jesus' first advent.<sup>35</sup>

Though these views attempt to understand the one-thousand-year period, their apparent incompatibility with explicit scriptural passages that indicate Jesus' heavenly union with the redeemed immediately after the resurrection and the subsequent air-borne meeting leaves much to be desired (Isa 51:11, Matt 25:21; Luke 22:28-30; John 12:26; 14:1-3; 1 Thess 4:16-17; 5:10; Rev 3:21; 7:9-10, 14, 17; 11:12; 21:1, 3-4; 22:3). At best, the position of the historic premillennialists comes closer to connecting with these passages. However, its insistence on an earthly reign of Christ for a period symbolized by the one-thousand years falls short of the thrust of related biblical passages.

## **Resurrection**

The notion of the resurrection is a subtheme of the second advent of Jesus. Scripture teaches two types of resurrection. First, there is the resurrection unto life and second the resurrection unto death (John 5:39). The first resurrection will happen at the beginning of the millennium and the second resurrection occurs at the end of the millennium. Highlighting the resurrection unto life, the Bible affirms that both the "righteous dead" and the "righteous living" shall meet the Lord in the sky after the former group had resurrected and the latter group translated (1 Thess 4:16-17; 1 Cor 15:50-55).

While there is a general agreement among Evangelical scholars on the air-borne meeting between Jesus and the redeemed, the event that immediately follows this meeting is debated. On the one hand, some scholars argue that Christ and the participants in the airborne meeting return immediately to the earth.<sup>36</sup> Other scholars argue that Jesus will take the redeemed to heaven immediately after the air-borne meeting.<sup>37</sup> Following the trajectory of Christ in aerial places and the hope of the redeemed (Dan 7:13; Mark 13:26-27; 14:62; John 14:1-6; 2 Cor 5:8; 12:1-4; Rev 1:7), it is safe to conclude that Paul indicates a 'fetching' of the redeemed to heaven. Thus the air-borne meeting between Christ and the redeemed (1 Thess 4:16-17) leads to a "heavenly entrance."<sup>38</sup> This being the case, then, the latter view is theologically sound.

## **Judgment**

The notion that God will judge humanity someday is evidenced in Scripture (Matt 25:32-33; 2 Pet 2:4; Rom 2:5; 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10; Heb 9:27; 10:27; 1 John 4:17). However, Evangelical scholars differ in their views concerning the destruction of the unrepentant. Evangelical Universalists generally hold one of two views. One, God's nature of love, mercy, and grace (*omni* benevolence) are incompatible with the causation of suffering. Since punishment involves some degree of suffering or pain, it is inconceivable how God will cause pain to beneficiaries of His *omni* benevolence.<sup>39</sup> Two, the purpose of God's *omni* benevolence is to redeem all of humanity. Consequently, all wayward creatures, humans, and angels will be reconciled to God in the "*apokatastasis*" (Acts 3:21).<sup>40</sup> The last view allows some degree of divine punishment of the wicked on rehabilitative grounds. Accordingly, they see the judgment as a therapeutic divine process that will eventually lead to the salvation of all creation.



In direct opposition to the positions of the Evangelical Universalists, non-Evangelical Universalists affirm the destruction/suffering of the unrepentant in the final judgment. Two main views exist within this school of thought- conditionalists/annihilationists<sup>41</sup>, and traditionalists. Conditionalists/annihilationists hold that God's act of punishing the unrepentant will eventually result in the extinction of the wicked.<sup>42</sup> Contrariwise, traditionalists argue that God's act of punishing the wicked is incessant. Thus the unrepentant will endlessly suffer in hellfire<sup>43</sup>. Regardless of the pleasantness of the view of Evangelical Universalists, their notion of a sort of restorative judgment falls short of biblical scrutiny. There are enough biblical passages in support of the non-Evangelical universalist position (Pro 16:4; Psa1:5; 9:5; 37:28; 92:7; 145:2; Isa 34:10; Ezek 3:18; Nahum 1:15; Mal 4:3; Job 36:6; Matt 10:28; 2 Pet 2:9; 3:7; Rev 11:18; 21:8). The basis of the traditionalist view is rickety on the face of clear biblical inquiry. The trajectory usage of "fire" and "hell" in the Bible strongly tilts towards the conditionalist/annihilationist's position (Gen 19; 1 Kings 18; 2 Kgs 23:10; Josh 15:8; 18:16; 2 Chr 28:3; 33:6; Psa 37:20; Isa 5:24, 9:18; Isa 47:14; Jer 17:27; Neh 11:30; Mal 4:1; 3:2; Matt 5:22; 10:28; 18: 8-9; Mark 9:43, 48; Jude 7; Rev 20:9). Rather than apply the expression "forever and ever" to the means of destruction, the expression should be appropriately applied to the consequences of destruction (Isa 34:10; Rev 14:11; 20:10). In light of this, it will be accurate to conclude that the fire that destroys the wicked will burn them unto complete destruction.

### **Rapture**

Though the word "rapture" is foreign to the Bible, the concept it represents is embedded in it. The term is an English translation of the Latin *rapio*. The Latin "*rapio*" translates the Greek "*harpazo*" in 1 Thess 4:17. In the biblical passage of 1 Thess 4:17 "*harpazo*" is translated as "caught up." It describes a futuristic situation in which the redeemed will be snatched away to meet the savior in an air-borne meeting (Matt 24:40, 41; Luke 17:34). Some biblical passages imply this air-borne meeting (John 14:2-3; 1 Cor 15:51-52). Evangelicals generally agree that there will not be any secret or spiritual rapture.<sup>44</sup> Also, Evangelicals share the belief that the rapture occurs during the Second Advent.<sup>45</sup> But Evangelicals do not agree on the timing of the rapture. The varying views about the timing of the rapture have been categorized under the terms pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, and post-tribulation. Pre-tribulationists argue that the rapture will occur before the seven-year period of intense tribulation.<sup>46</sup> Within this

school of thought, some scholars aver that only true believers shall be raptured before the onset of the tribulation.<sup>47</sup> Others who repent shall be raptured at the *parousia* when Jesus and the participants of the first rapture return to earth at the end of the period of severe tribulation. This view is sometimes referred to as the "partial rapture theory."<sup>48</sup>

As the name of the theory suggests, post-tribulation theory, hold the view that believers shall be raptured after the tribulation during the *parousia*.<sup>49</sup> Another view, the mid-tribulation theory, argues that the rapture will take place in the midst of the seven-year period of tribulation.<sup>50</sup> Exponents of this theory believe that after three-and-half years of experiencing severe tribulation, believers shall be taken away before God pours out His wrath upon the earth.<sup>51</sup> A strand of thought within the mid-tribulation theory indicates that Christ will rapture his saints close to the end of the seven years of severe tribulation.<sup>52</sup> One can observe that biblical passages implying the occurrence of such event, as the concept of rapture implies, substantially leans on the side of the post-tribulationist. Some scriptural passages have been explained as basis for the other views (Matt 24:40-44; Luke 17:34-36; 21:36; Phil 3:20; Titus 2:12-13; 2 Tim 4:8; Heb 9:28; 1 Thess 5:9). Explicit statements from scriptural passages such as Matt 13:24-30; John 16:33; 17:15; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 4:16-17; and 2 Thess. 2:1-3 strongly suggest the deliverance of the saints after the tribulation. However, the specific duration of the tribulation is theologically contestable.<sup>53</sup>

One may argue that these varying views about Christian eschatology within Evangelicalism reveal the tolerance and elasticity of the movement. However, a religious movement fraught with so many inconsistencies on this crucial Christian subject may confuse its adherents. The quest for a correct exposition of the theologies of the sub-events of eschatology will logically highlight the adverse effects that such elasticity and tolerance of opinions bring. Since all these opposing views cannot be entirely right at the same time, the observer has interpretative options to explore. It could be that none of these views is correct. Also, it could be that some of them are right and others wrong. Further, it could be that all of them are partially right because each of them may focus on salient aspects of the sub-events of Christian eschatology. The risk such state of affairs may pose for the centrality of the Bible in Evangelical theology raises an urgent need for unifying studies.

### Toward a Unifying Study

Notwithstanding the divergent views on the sub-events of Christian eschatology within Evangelicalism, it is expected that a unifying approach will contribute immensely towards a meaningful Evangelical dialogue on Christian eschatology. Rather than focus on the points of departure among the various eschatological sub-events, this approach selectively highlights a single theme that serves as a pivot for a meaningful discourse on Christian eschatology. In this regard, I think the concept of the *parousia* is key to comprehending the broad concept of Christian eschatology. Within Evangelicalism, all the eschatological sub-events are tied to the *parousia*. The second coming of Christ begins the millennium. It also sets the stage for the first resurrection and the subsequent ‘catching up’ of the believers, both resurrected and living, as well as the judgment.

The second advent of Jesus is a central teaching in the Bible. Though the concept is present in the Old Testament, it is difficult to distinguish the first advent from the second (Mic 5:2; Isa 53:11-12; Dan 9:26; Zach 12:10). Regardless of this difficulty, Old Testament writers share a common theme—that the Messiah shall appear, shall be temporarily terminated, but shall re-appear again. Represented in the Hebrew terms עֲמֻנָאֵל (‘êl) (Isa 7:14; 8:8) and יְהוָה יִהְיֶה (yō-wm Yah-weh) (Joel 2:1-2, 10-11, 31-32; Isa 13:9-10; Mal 4:5), the idea of the ‘coming’ meant both deliverance and judgment (Amos 5:18-20; Isa 13:6; Zaph 1:15; Joel 2:32). The Prophet Obadiah calls it a day of just recompense (Obad 1:15). A critical review of this theme casts light on the two-phased mission of the coming of Christ (Isa 9:6). Yet the Old Testament writers focused on the activity of the second phase more than a predisposition to describe the manner of such appearance. They expected a day or period in which sin, and all its entailment, will be destroyed in God’s presence.

Similar to the favor bestowed upon subjects by the coming of a king or a royal in the Oriental culture, New Testament writers used *παρουσία* (*parousia*) to describe their expectations concerning the coming of Christ. Used in about 24 instances, the term mostly describes the second advent of Christ (Matt 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thess 2:1, 19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; James 5:7-8; 2 Pet 1:16; 2 Pet 3:4; 1 John 2:28). The answers to questions inquiring into exact signs/manner and timing of the *parousia* by Jesus, Paul, and Peter strongly shift focus from the ‘when,’ ‘how,’ and ‘what’ questions to the ‘why’ question. Apart from general information of events preceding the *parousia*, Jesus quickly describes activities of redemption and condemnation occasioned by the *parousia*

(Mk 13; Lk 21; Matt 24:22, 30, 51; Matt 25: 10-12, 41, 46; Jn 14:3). Like Jesus, Paul highlights reward and punishment in his reference to the *parousia* (1 Thess 4:16-17; 2 Thess 1:8-9). For him, the *parousia* is the expectation of the righteous (Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17; Col 3:4). It will be a time for vindicating believers (1 Cor 15:52). In a similar manner, Peter draws attention to the events that will occur during the *parousia* (1 Pet 4:13). He saw it as a day of just recompense both for the wicked and the righteous (2 Pet 3:10-13). Like the Old Testament writers, New Testament writers used *parousia* to refer to the Christian optimism that sin, and all its attending problems, will be forever destroyed in the presence of the redeemer.

Like the biblical writers, evangelicals may focus on the reason/purpose of the *parousia*. Such a focus will shift the theological discourse from the ‘when,’ ‘how,’ and ‘what’ questions to the ‘why’ question. In answering the ‘why’ questions, evangelicals must move from speculations to the point where the bible offers the guiding principles. This way, the primacy of the bible in detailing the purpose of the *parousia* will be incontrovertible. Once the purpose of the *parousia* is placed at the center stage, a uniform sense will be made out of the sub-events of eschatology. While explanations that agrees with the biblical purpose of the *parousia* must be sustained, all other views that contradict or offsets the biblical purpose of the *parousia* must be rejected.

### **Conclusion**

The foregoing discussion indicates the varying and conflicting views on the sub-events of eschatology within evangelicalism. While there are agreements among these views, differences also exist on the conception of some of the sub-events. This would seem to reveal some internal inconsistencies within evangelical theology. Rather than inspire hope in adherents, the divergent views are likely to confuse believers regarding the significance of the doctrine of eschatology. Since all of the divergent views cannot be right at the same time, such confusion is likely to pose some interpretative options for believers. The activation of such options may reduce the credible place the Bible has in evangelical theology. This fixation casts light on the urgency of a unifying study of eschatology within evangelicalism.

In that light, the study proposes that the biblical notion of the *parousia* should be the key to understanding the notion of Christian eschatology in all of its broadest sense. Biblically, the reason/purpose of the second advent of Christ is more important than the signs/manner and

timing of the event. Bible writers perceived it as a day in which the wicked will be utterly destroyed but the righteous will be redeemed. Using this framework, evangelicals may exclude any discourse on the sub-events of Christian eschatology that is not in consonance with the established biblical purpose for the *parousia*. It is hoped that this approach towards the understanding of Christian eschatology will reconcile the diversity of opinions within Evangelicalism. Based on sound biblical and theological analyses, this approach could succeed in directing Evangelical scholars, irrespective of the strand of thought, toward consensus on the various sub-events of Christian eschatology. Again, it will give a contemporary crystallization to the importance Evangelicals place on the centrality of the Christ-event within its eschatological considerations.

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