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**Christian Eschatology:  
A Source of Fear and Paranoid or Hope?**

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**Introduction**

Christian theology is the study of God and how he interacts with his creation. Central to this understanding of theology is the doctrine of eschatology, which is how God's interaction with his creation is moving towards the ultimate fulfillment of God's original purpose and intention in creation.

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To comprehend the nature of Christian eschatology, one needs to connect it with the whole concept of God’s creation. Christian eschatology is generally defined as the doctrine of the last things, the end of the present world of suffering and pain. This perspective has tended to see eschatology as independent from the Christian doctrine of creation. To avoid the old confusion, Christian eschatology cannot be treated separately from God’s larger purpose for creation. Understanding God’s purpose for creation is the key that unlocks the answers to the following questions.

What is “hope” as it pertains to humankind in the midst of suffering? What are the implications of our Hope being an omnipotent God who promises to be with us always? Most importantly of all, “Is Christian eschatology a source of fear, paranoia or hope?” To answer these questions one needs to stress that in this life no suffering or pain can initially be seen to offer hope. Suffering and pain are among the worst enemies of humanity. Generally, human beings respond to suffering and pain by looking forward to their end. The Christian doctrine of eschatology fits into this desire to see the end of a broken and decaying world, which brings with it all forms of hardship and disappointment.

#### **A. Historical Overview: Surprised by Contemporary Silence**

Each time human existence gets threatened by world events, Christians pay considerable attention to the doctrine of eschatology. In other words, unfavorable world events usually trigger the fear of suffering and pain, therefore reviving concerns regarding human flourishing. The present situation of climate change, economic meltdown, and terrorism are huge threats to humanity, however, the way Christian eschatology featured in theological discourse in the 1950s and 1980s is not the same way it is featuring today. What has changed?

The fifties and the eighties were time periods very close to World War I and II and the Cold War. Such events created an atmosphere of global fear, pain and distress. They gave raise to prophets of doom; some with the goal of encouraging the church to prepare for the coming king of kings. Others displayed their ignorance of biblical apocalyptic literature. In 1983 Wolfhart Penneberg wrote an article entitled, “Constructive and Critical Functions of Christian Eschatology.” In it Penneberg outlined some of the reasons why

eschatology was given much attention in the 1950s and the 1970s. He wrote:

The last two decades witnessed a boom of eschatology in theological discussions. It emerged mainly from the impact of Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope. But a recovery of the eschatological concern in systematic theology has been due for some time, since Johannes Weiss' successful thesis of 1892 that Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God was not primarily a program for moral or social action, but had its roots in Jewish apocalypticism and envisaged a cosmic catastrophe that would occur when God in the imminent future would replace this present world by the new creation of his own kingdom without any human ado.<sup>2</sup>

Three decades later, in 1992, Karl Barth wrote in the second edition of his commentary on Romans that "A Christianity that does thoroughly and without reminder consist of eschatology would be thoroughly and totally devoid of Christ."<sup>3</sup> These are very strong words indeed. And yet it proved difficult to reappropriate to modern theology the new exegetical insight concerning the basic importance of eschatology within the framework of Jesus' message and teaching.

The primary reason was that "There was too deep a chasm separating the evolutionary outlook of the modern mind from the otherworldliness of apocalyptic expectations that focused on the imminent and catastrophic end of the present world. Thus it was no accident that Barth and Bultmann recovered the apocalyptic urgency of Jesus' message at the price of stripping it of its temporal prospect of a final future of this world."<sup>4</sup> The same problem of failing to make the connection between contemporary and future events applies to the current situation where Christian eschatology is not featuring in national and international discourses as one would expect. Christians are losing the connection between current events and the larger plan of God for his world. Some Christians respond to the issues of climate

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<sup>2</sup> Johannes Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reich Gottes* (1892; 3d ed. F. Hahn:Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), esp. 69ff, 84ff, 96ff.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (2d ed.; München: Kaiser, 1992), 298.

<sup>4</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Constructive and Critical Functions of Christian Eschatology" *The Ingersoll Lectures on Immortality*, delivered at the Divinity School, Harvard University, 13 October 1963, published in *The Harvard Theological Review Journal Divinity School*, vol. 77, No.2 April 1984), 119-139.

change, economic meltdown, terrorism, and youth restiveness as if there is no hope for a future.

Throughout human history, one can catalogue different reactions to human suffering and pain. In apocalyptic expectation, both the Old and New Testament paint a picture of grand events of a violent world whose end will usher in a new heaven and a new earth. In the effort to fast-track eschatological hope, apocalyptic reading of the Bible has led to a distortion of the concept of Christian eschatology, thereby causing trepidation. Regardless of this, it is fundamental to Christian faith, belief and practice. The biblical language of eschatology is rooted in the idea of ‘after life’ and the ushering in of a new heaven. However, misinterpretation of these ideas leaves the hearers with different psychological reactions—fear, paranoia, or hope.

The psychological response that results in fear and paranoia is caused by a so-called Christian eschatological perspective that has tended to see the world running its course without God. It eliminates the goal of Christian faith: a future with hope. It is caused by failure to recognize that it is God who has brought about this universe in the hope of realizing a specific purpose, which is the doctrine of creation. His intent is to guide the universe towards this realization, i.e. the doctrine of eschatology. If one grasps the doctrine of Christian eschatology, one will realize that creation is not just about what happened in Genesis, about origins; which is deism. Rather, it is about God continuing to interact with his creation even after the Fall of humankind. Hope comes when one recognizes that every moment of the universe implies a creative act by God. God upholds creation throughout time, and his decision to sustain the universe at each moment is one of creativity. Similarly, eschatology is not only concerned with the end, but with the realization of God’s purpose in each moment of creation.

### **B. The Context of Christian Eschatology**

Christian eschatology has the idea of the “final solution” of all the unresolvable problems of human sufferings and pain. This idea provides the context for eschatological discourse. Eschatological perspective falls within the history of apocalyptic movements which emanated from the situation of human uncertainty and desire for a future with hope. Heightened interest in eschatological discourse always indicates a tragic circumstance facing humanity. For example,

youth today across the global community are rising up against their leaders. They are protesting the continuing problem of unemployment, which they blame on the injustice of the elites. They see what is going on as the elite's lack of political will to change the status quo. No longer willing to wait, they are demanding immediate change to the status quo so that concrete democratic culture will be enthroned. They want to experience peace and justice, free press, rule of law and so on. Any situation of unemployment spells doom to these youth and dashes their hope for a future. Therefore, unemployment is unacceptable because they see it as a symptom of a systemic structure of injustice which the elites perpetuate. As such the youth want to see an end to injustice so that it does not continue to destroy their hope for a future. This situation is fertile for Christian eschatological discourse.

Similarly in the 1950s and 1960s, when civil unrest threatened democratic societies, apocalyptic visions were increasingly promoted. It was around this time that Reinhold Niebuhr wrote: "Man is the kind of animal who cannot merely live. If he lives at all he is bound to seek the realization of his true nature; and to his true nature, belongs his fulfillment in the lives of others. The will to live is thus transmuted into the will to self-realization; and self-realization involves self-giving in relation to others."<sup>5</sup> Any situation that tampers with this human reality, which Niebuhr described, will create tension and violent reaction. It aggravates the fear of the unknown and the desire for an end of undesirable elements in human society. The current wave of global and politically motivated crises threatens the future of humanity and may raise apocalyptic vision high. Youth in the Middle-East, in Europe and Asia want an end to misrule and the establishment of democratic civilization. In northern Nigeria, the Boko Haram sect, wants an end to western -style leadership. [In sum, the foundation of Christian eschatological hope is transmitted through "the sense of a tragic meaning of life...giving way to a pure despair.] This sentence doesn't make sense or seem to fit here."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Light* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 19.

<sup>6</sup> Niebuhr, *The Children of Light*, 34.

The achievement of universal peace and justice eludes humanity and creates the desire for change. Niebuhr explains: “Hebraic prophetism gave rise to an apocalyptic movement in which nationalistic and universalistic motifs were at war with each other.”<sup>7</sup> The critical matter in apocalyptic movements is a human desire for universal peace and justice, which is the goal of life. Hence, “Christian universalism” was born in the atmosphere of this (Hebraic) apocalyptic movement, proclaiming to the world the end of an era of racial and ethnic difference: “In Christ,” Paul says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3: 28)

### **C. The Kingdom of God: eschatology’s central viewpoint**

What brings about fear and paranoia instead of hope in eschatology discourses is largely perspective. A helpful perspective is to recognize that the idea of the kingdom of God is central to the concept of biblical eschatology. Christian eschatology is not man made. It is God’s divine revelation of what he is orchestrating in humanity and in all of creation and its history. Over the years, theologians have tried to address the inherent confusion in the matter of Christian eschatology. The eschatological views and definition of two of these theologians are worth examining. Jürgen Moltmann’s Eschatological View

Jürgen Moltmann and many other scholars have explained that the primary basis of the biblical discourse on eschatology is apocalyptic material. Moltmann, who is one of the survivors of War World II, has wrestled with the idea of Christian eschatology and arrived at two different views which reveal an inherent tension. According to Moltmann this tension is nothing but “the antithesis between futurist eschatology and presentative eschatology.”<sup>8</sup> This antithesis claims:

The end of all things... must either lie wholly and entirely in the future, or have wholly and entirely already come, and thus be present. According to this view, future and present lie along the same temporal line. So it is then also easy to find a reconciling solution when distinguishing in temporal terms between that which is ‘now already’ present and that which is ‘not yet’ present. If the kingdom of

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<sup>7</sup> Niebuhr, *The Children of Light*, 156.

<sup>8</sup> Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 6.

God is the quintessence of Christianity's eschatological message, then according to this viewpoint it is 'already there' in a hidden sense, but is 'not yet' present in the sense of being already manifest. The hope is then that what is *not yet* can after all still *be*.<sup>9</sup>

If this claim were accepted without argument, it would have been the solution to the tension. But as Moltmann argues, "[T]his is only an apparent solution..."<sup>10</sup> An apparent solution cannot give hope. Rather it leaves its proponents with fear, paranoia and despair. Moltmann identified the following two viewpoints of Christian eschatological perspective.

### 1. Apocalyptic Approach

This approach is a futurist eschatological approach. Its concern is the final of all the finalities that are there. Most of discussion and definition of eschatology falls within this framework: "Eschatology is generally held to be the doctrine of "the Last Things," or "the end of all things."<sup>11</sup> Moltmann observes that to think this way is to think in good apocalyptic terms, but it does not understand eschatology in the Christian sense. He writes,

To think apocalyptic means thinking things through to their end: the ambiguities of history must sometime become unambiguous; the time of transience must sometime pass away; the unanswerable questions of existence must sometimes cease. The question about the end bursts out of the torment of history and the intolerableness of historical existence. To echo a German proverb: better a terrifying end than this endless terror. <sup>12</sup>

Eschatology seems to search for the 'final solution' of all the insoluble problems of the present world. Moltmann argues:

Theological eschatology seems to present the 'Endgame' of the theodrama World History. This was Hans Urs von Balthasar's view, when he took over this title as a legacy from Samuel Beckett. If we look back to the history of eschatology, we see it pictorially represented as God's great final judgment of the good and the wicked, with heaven for the one and hell for the other. Is the Last Judgment God's final solution for human history? Other people have dreamed about Armagedon, the final duel in the struggle between Christ and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., x.

Antichrist, or God and the Devil—whether the duel be fought out with divine fire or with modern nuclear armament. 13

This kind of approach to the study of Christian eschatology leaves its proponents in great confusion, which eventually aggravates despair, paranoia and fear. The problem, as Moltmann identified it, is: “Eschatology is always thought to deal with the end, the last day, the last word, the last act: God has the last word. But if eschatology were that and only that, it would be better to turn one’s back on it altogether; for ‘the last things’ spoil one’s taste for the penultimate ones, and the dreamed of, or hoped for, end of history robs us of our freedom among history’s many possibilities, and our tolerance for all the things in history that are unfinished and provisional.” 14 Consequently, Christians will discover that they can no longer put up with earthly, limited and vulnerable life, and in their eschatological finality they will destroy life’s fragile beauty. 15 The irony is, “The person who presses forward to the end of life misses life itself. If eschatology were no more than religion’s ‘final solution’ to all the questions, a solution allowing it to have the last word, it would undoubtedly be a particularly unpleasant form of theological dogmatism, if not psychological terrorism. And it has in fact been used in just this way by a number of apocalyptic arm-twisters among our contemporaries.” 16

What this approach calls the end is not the end per se. Christian eschatology will give hope if it is seen as the doctrine of both the end and the beginning of life. Moltmann thus argues,

*Christian eschatology has nothing to do with apocalyptic ‘final solutions’ of this kind, for its subject is not ‘the end’ at all. On the contrary, what it is about is the new creation of all things. Christian eschatology is the remembered hope of the raising of the crucified Christ, so it talks about beginning afresh in the deadly end. ‘The end of Christ—after all that was his true beginning’, said Ernest Bloch. Christian eschatology follows this Christological pattern in all its personal, historical and cosmic dimensions: in the end is the beginning.*<sup>17</sup>

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13 Ibid., x.

14 Ibid., x-xi.

15 Ibid., x-xi.

16 Ibid., xi.

17 Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, xi. Moltmann’s classic work raised very important questions for Christians living in an age of Islamic insurgencies. After [Footnote continued on next page ... ]

## 2. Christian Approach and interpretation

This approach argues that biblical eschatology does not give a picture of annihilation of all things. Rather, the end is the beginning of new life. Thus for Moltmann, the Christian approach is more in line with the vision of God for creation where, “the eternal kingdom and the eternal creation draw together to a single focus: the *cosmic Shekinah of God*. God desires to come to his ‘dwelling’ in his creation, the home of his identity in the world, and in it to his ‘rest’, his perfect, eternal joy.”<sup>18</sup> This is “the goal of God’s eschatological Shekinah, in which the whole creation will be new and eternally living, and every created thing will with unveiled face arrive at its own self.”<sup>19</sup> In saying this Moltmann left out the idea of hell, which is part of the issue of eschatology.

Perhaps the reason why is what he believes in Christian eschatological hope. He argues: “None of us are given hope just for ourselves. The hope of Christians is always hope for Israel too; the hope of Jews and Christians is always hope for the peoples of the world as well; the hope of the peoples of the world is also hope for this earth and everything that lives in it. And hope for the whole community of creation is ultimately hope that its Creator and Redeemer will arrive at his goal, and may find in creation his home.”<sup>20</sup> This approach or definition of eschatology demonstrates that Christian eschatological hope is not an individual hope alone. It is hope for both the human community and the rest of creation. This is why Moltmann observes that it is a grievous mistake to make the individual soul the center of eschatological concern or discourse. This will create despair, fear and paranoia instead of hope.

To escape the mistake of the traditional definition of eschatology, God and his kingdom must be the center of the discourse. The question of whether Christian eschatology is a source of fear, despair, paranoia or hope is based on two approaches to the discussion of eschatology: individual versus universal eschatology. Discussion of

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World War II, the survivors spent their energies debating. Among themselves instead of trying to help the church grasp the present and future reality of eschatological faith and hope.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 21.

eschatology that focuses on the individual soul only as the center of the concern leads to fear, despair and paranoia. But universal eschatology, the approach that centers on God and his kingdom, gives hope. Moltmann concludes: “We shall only be able to overcome the unfruitful and paralyzing confrontation between the personal and the cosmic hope, individual and universal eschatology, if we neither pietistically put the soul at the centre, nor secularistically the world. The centre has to be God, God’s kingdom and God’s glory.”<sup>21</sup>

Moltmann draws this conclusion as he reflects on the Lord’s Prayer, whose main point is “Thy Kingdom come and thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Therefore Christian hope is “for the kingdom of God. That is first and foremost a hope for God, the hope that God will arrive at his rights in his creation, at his peace in his Sabbath, and at his eternal joy in his image, human beings. The fundamental question of biblical eschatology is: when will God show himself in his divinity to heaven and earth? And therein is to be found in the promise of the coming God: ‘the whole earth is full of his glory’ (Isaiah 6:3).”<sup>22</sup> Consequently, “the glorifying of God in the world embraces the *salvation* and eternal life of human beings, the *deliverance* of all created things, and the *peace* of the new creation.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, Christian eschatology has four horizons:

- a) It is hope in God for God’s glory
- b) It is hope in God for the new creation of the world.
- c) It is hope in God for the history of human beings on earth.
- d) It is hope in God for the resurrection and eternal life of human beings.<sup>24</sup>

Moltmann realizes that a reordering of the above list may help us understand the subject better. The most helpful ordering begins with personal hope, advances logically to historical hope, passes on to cosmic hope, and thereby ends with God’s glory for God’s sake.<sup>25</sup> The premise is: the first effect of eschatology is personal faith. New life in this world follows. And out of that springs hope for the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., xvi.

redemption of the body and the expectation of the transformation of this whole world into God's kingdom.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, Moltmann's analysis brings fresh and helpful insights into the subject.

### **3. Richards Hays' View or Interpretation of Eschatology**

Christian eschatology will be a total disaster if its primary focus is otherworldly, "the endgame." The Hebraic apocalyptic movement makes sense only when read with the lens of the New Testament eschatological perspective. Richard Hays (1996) has contributed to a richer and clearer understanding of the present significance of the doctrine of Christian eschatology. His careful analysis of the matter shows the centrality of this subject to all Christian beliefs and practice. Hays pays considerable attention to the synergy between the present Christian experience of salvation and the future consummation of salvation which is generally known as eschatological hope. Hays is one of the biblical theologians and ethicists whose hermeneutical interpretation of eschatology has brought fresh insight into an understanding of the nature and character of Christian eschatology. He convincingly argues that there are three important elements that give a richer sense of Christian eschatology.

#### **a. The Redeemed *community***

According to Hays, all materials on Christian eschatology must be read through focal lenses of community. Only when that happens will Christians recognize the significance of the church in a broken and decaying world. He writes: "The church as a whole is called to live the way of discipleship and to exemplify the love of enemies."<sup>27</sup> This shifts the concept of Christian eschatology to the present concern: love, justice, forgiveness, peace and reconciliation. Christian belief in the end of the world does not in any way invalidate the present relevance of eschatological ideas. There is an intrinsic connection between *the already* and *the not yet*. This is why Jesus through the Gospel writers and the writers of the epistles urge the church to pay considerable attention to its present vocation:

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 1996), 337.

“Matthew’s call to be the light of the world, Paul’s call to embody the ministry of reconciliation, Revelation’s call to the saints to overcome the dragon through the word of their testimony.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore as a redeemed community, whose calling is to exemplify eschatological reality in the present scheme of things, “The church is called to live as a city set on a hill, a city that lives in light of wisdom, as a sign of God’s coming kingdom.”<sup>29</sup>

This focus does not negate the present reality of suffering and pain. Rather this redeemed community is called “to the work of reconciliation and—as a part of that vocation—suffering even in the face of great injustice”<sup>30</sup> which is part and parcel of the package. Saint James connects the Christian idea of eschatology with the Christian present experience of suffering and pain. For James, instead of eschatology becoming a source of fear and paranoia, it is a source of undefiled joy. It is such an important matter that whoever lacks wisdom on how to connect Christians’ present suffering and pain into eschatological hope should ask God to give him wisdom. James writes, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given him.”<sup>31</sup> James makes a concrete connection between Christian suffering and pain with eschatological hope: “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”<sup>32</sup> James expects this revelation to give his readers every sense of hope instead of fear and paranoia.

#### **b. The Cross**

Hays gives Christian readers a second element that can help them arrive at a definitive answer to the main question posed in these later days. Hays points out that the *cross* is a very vital element in the

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<sup>28</sup> Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 337.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>31</sup> James 1:2-5 NIV

<sup>32</sup> James 1:12

Christian concept of eschatology; it gives a healthy and hopeful view of eschatology (1 Cor. 1:18-2:5). Here Hays explains that the cross presents the community with a roadmap, a redemptive model of how to successfully portray the eschatological vision in the present world, regardless of injustice and all forms of human excess. Hays states that in the cross, God revealed “the other wisdom in light of which the community lives, [which] is the paradoxical wisdom of the cross.... The passion narrative becomes the fundamental paradigm for the Christian life.”<sup>33</sup> It is a costly vision, as , “the community is likely to pay severe price for its witness: persecution, scorn, the charge of being ineffective and irrelevant.”<sup>34</sup> In his analysis of the cross as an important element in Christian eschatology, Hays is able to illustrate the point that Christian morality and ethics are central to biblical view of eschatology.<sup>35</sup>

### c. The New Creation

The third element is *the new creation*. Christian eschatological hope is rooted in the idea of a new creation. This hope does not make Christians fearful, paranoid or full of despair. Instead, behind the idea of a new creation is the belief that “the nonviolent, enemy loving community is to be vindicated by the resurrection of the dead.”<sup>36</sup> In that perspective of the world, “Death does not have the final word; in the resurrection of Jesus the power of God has triumphed over the power of violence and prefigured the redemption of all creation. The church lives in the present time as a sign of the new order that God has promised. All the New Testament texts, dealing with violence, must therefore be read in this eschatological perspective.”<sup>37</sup>

The idea of a new creation presents a hopeful picture instead of a despairing, fearful and paranoid present or future. For example, Jesus’ teaching on “turn the other cheek” which has generally been misread and interpreted can only make sense if it is “read through the lenses of the image of a new creation.”<sup>38</sup> Without such an approach, Christian

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<sup>33</sup> Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 337.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 338

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 338.

eschatology cannot avoid been a source of despair, fear, and paranoia. Hays argues that if that were not the case, “Jesus’ directive in Matthew 5:38-48, to “turn the other cheek” will only become a mundane proverb for how to cope with conflict. But this will be ridiculous. For if the world is always to go on as it does now, if the logic that ultimately governs the world is the immanent logic of the rulers of this age, then the meek are the losers and their cheek-turning only invites more senseless abuse. As a mundane proverb, “Turn the other cheek” is simply bad advice.”<sup>39</sup> The only way such action can make sense is “if the God and Father of Jesus Christ is actually the ultimate judge of the world and if his will for his people is definitely revealed in Jesus.”<sup>40</sup> Christian eschatology that holds out hope for the present-life-experience is the language of Matthew’s Gospel; “turning the other cheek makes sense if and only if it is really true that the meek will inherit the earth, if and only if it is really true that those who act on Jesus’ words have built their house on a rock so that it will stand in the day of judgment. Turning the other cheek makes sense if and only if all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus.”<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, Hays observes that Paul’s exhortation “that we should bless our persecutors, eschew vengeance, and give food and drink to our enemies” makes sense if and only if it really is true that ‘the night is far gone, the day is near’ (Romans 13:12)—the day when all creation will be set free from bondage (Romans 8:18-25).”<sup>42</sup> The whole point is that eschatology is critical to the Christian present way of life, belief and values. The New Testament concept of eschatology requires rereading ethical teaching through the New Testament idea of the new creation. The church is called to stand as a sign of God’s promised future hope and glory even in the present reality of a dark world. Once Christians grasp this truth, their way, however, difficult, will be brightened and result in pure joy. “The Apocalypse” compares

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 338.

this hope with the imagery of the marriage of the Lamb, depicting the eschatological consummation of all things (Revelation 19:6-9).<sup>43</sup>

In sum, Moltmann and Hays recognize the paradoxical, contemporaneous, and universal nature of the concept of Christian eschatology. For example, both Moltmann and Hays believe that there is contemporaneous partial fulfillment of the eschatological dream. Their provocative analyses challenge long-established notions of Christian eschatology which have generally led to fear and paranoia. Specifically, Moltmann argues, “When Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God is ‘at hand’, he is not looking into the future in the temporal sense; he is looking into the heaven of the present. The kingdom does not ‘come’ out of the future into the present. It comes from heaven to earth, as the Lord’s Prayer tells us.”<sup>44</sup> Moltmann therefore concludes: “The eschaton is neither the future of time nor timeless eternity. It is God’s coming and his arrival.”<sup>45</sup> Revelation 10:6 describes the mystery of time, which as Moltmann explains, “[I]s ‘the realization and extension of God’s rule over the whole world’. It is the completion of history and creation, its perfecting into the kingdom of glory in which God himself ‘indwells’ his creation.”<sup>46</sup> Consequently, he concludes, “The eschatological moment itself must be thought of, beyond the end and consummation of history, as the consummation of creation-in-the-beginning and therefore as the exit from time into eternity...”<sup>47</sup> One resonates with Moltmann because God’s purpose is to dwell in his creation, and in it to be ‘all in all.’<sup>48</sup> Moltmann’s theory of eschatology fits the incarnational principle: Emmanuel, God with us.

#### **D. Christ’s Incarnation and Christian Eschatology**

Christian eschatology is based on God’s larger purpose for creation. It is a doctrine that realizes the reason why God strategically placed Jesus Christ at the center of his interaction with his creation; Christ is the all in all of creation. Christian eschatological hope begins

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 338, 364.

<sup>44</sup> Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 16.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 294.

with the incarnation. Through Christ's incarnation, God is working towards accomplishing his purpose for creating humanity and the rest of creation. That is why the Bible itself emphasizes a Christo-centric idea of creation. All human beings are created by God's Word, for his Word and in his Word. God has given Christians his divine power (Holy Spirit), not for them to destroy themselves, but to redeem them, transform them into his likeness, so that they can participate in the divine nature and thereby be in communion with God. By Christ becoming human (the Incarnation), he shows his willingness to be called their brother.<sup>49</sup> This perspective helps Christians to grasp Christian eschatology in all its truths.

Paul tells believers that everything that has ever been made has been made through Christ, in Christ, and for Christ. Eschatology looks with refreshing hope at both the present and the future realities of our world: God indwelling all of his creation. Paul sees this metaphor as culminating in Christ; the Spirit transforms Christians 'into his likeness,' as he puts it in his second letter to the Corinthians. Jesus is called the 'visible image of the invisible God,' assuming bodily form to give a unique revelation of God's purpose for humanity. This idea is intrinsically rooted in the package of Christian faith and practice. For instance, people often believe in Jesus Christ because he offers them hope for the present and the future life reality. Paul describes the Thessalonian Christians: "[Y]ou turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath."<sup>50</sup> Indeed, any careful reader of the writings of the Apostles of the New Testament will realize that the God who promised (vowed) to be with Christians till the end of the age is not a liar.<sup>51</sup> Events in the world are not outside his eternal plan for humanity and all of creation. The big picture of God's unfolding drama of salvation includes the transformation of all created things to their original intent. Grasping this big picture, Paul explains that in times of human hardship— suffering, pain and even death—the essence of Christian eschatological hope is to strengthen "the faith of

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<sup>49</sup> Hebrews 2:11.

<sup>50</sup> 1 Thessalonians 1: 9-10 NIV.

<sup>51</sup> Hebrews 7: says "It is impossible for God to lie."

God’s elect” and enhance their “knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness—a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time, and at his appointed season he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me (Paul) by the command of God our Savior.”<sup>52</sup> Christian eschatology is rooted in “the hope for eternal life, which God ...”<sup>53</sup> promised all those who truly believe in Christ. It will seem logical to say that the idea of God promising eternal life ought to give Christians hope and not paranoia or fear. If God does not lie nor die then he can be trusted to fulfill his promises to Christians. The idea of God not lying is an immense truth. It shows that God cannot promise what he cannot give. It is also rooted in the hope of a time of perfect peace and security, when no one will make Christians afraid any longer.<sup>54</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In a world of diverse threats and their enslaving fear, the hermeneutical interpretation of Christian eschatology cannot afford to continue to encourage a situation of paranoia and fear. Christian eschatology is the view of history presenting God as the supreme owner of his creation. It is a doctrine meant to illustrate the fact that regardless of the apparent reality of the world, God is and will be God over all of his creation. The cross set in motion the new creation. As Christians, we must not allow fear of death or pain to lead us into emulating the actions of unbelievers. Jesus said, “All this I have told you so that you will not go astray” (John 16:1). To avoid straying from the faith, Paul proposes that we overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21). Earlier on he said: “[B]e... patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.... Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.....do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of God” (Romans 12:12). The text is easy to read and even interpret. But to obey it today is difficult. Yet it is not impossible. It is extremely difficult to think of this when faced with the challenge of our hope for the future. Love language is difficult to come by in times of crisis. But this is what Christian discipleship

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<sup>52</sup> Titus 1:1-3

<sup>53</sup> Titus 1:2

<sup>54</sup> Jeremiah 46:27

demands. Love never fails; it does not give up on God; it perseveres. For this to happen, Paul says that Christian “love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good” (Romans 12:9).

God’s will in Christian suffering and pain cannot be determined if love is not genuine. Christian suffering and pain are sometimes part of God’s will for his children. However, determining when is difficult. What helps us though is our attitude. St. Peter explains that one’s attitude to suffering and pain matters. First is to realize the significance of Jesus Christ going through suffering and pain. Peter calls Christians to pay careful attention to what Jesus Christ has done: “Since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves with the same attitude.”<sup>55</sup> It is a Christian’s attitude to suffering and pain that will help him to appreciate God’s sovereign will. The attitude should be that of seeing suffering and pain as the reality of a broken world. Nothing should surprise Christians. Peter tells Christians:

Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.... If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.<sup>56</sup>

Second, if God were to open the eyes of Christians to grasp the future benefit of their suffering and pain they would pray for the privilege to taste suffering and pain. The mystery is that they accord Christians the opportunity and the privilege of revealing Christ. Grasping this mystery will save contemporary Christians from being paralyzed by their fear.

It was because Paul understood the secret of Christian suffering and pain that he prayed and sought the privilege of participating in them. He prayed, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain the resurrection from the dead.”<sup>57</sup> Many Christians want to know Christ. They may even resonate with Paul in this prayer. But they are not willing to suffer for

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<sup>55</sup> 1 Peter 4:1 NIV.

<sup>56</sup> 1 Peter 4:12-16 NIV.

<sup>57</sup> Philippians 3:10-11.

the sake of Christ. How can Christians have the privilege of enjoying the fellowship of sharing in his suffering if their attitude to suffering and pain is completely negative? This attitude will not help them appreciate the fact that God is capable of using even terrorism to accomplish his eternal purposes. Jeremy Taylor rightly says, “Whatsoever we beg of God, let us also work for it.” Therefore, if we pray like Paul we should be willing to experience suffering and pain. Suffering and pain are God’s will for his children. Peter concludes: “So then, who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.”<sup>58</sup> Our attitude toward Christian enemies will determine whether or not we will still see God as a faithful and good God. It will also determine whether or not we will continue to do good instead of evil.

The kind of attitude that helped Christ to surrender under God’s will in all of his suffering and pain is humility. Humility is essential as Christians respond to suffering and pain. Hence Peter implores: “All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due times.”<sup>59</sup> One of the reasons why violence has escalated in Nigeria is because of the absence of humility. Humility alone will make Christians willing to surrender themselves under the mighty hand of God instead of devising ways of self-defense that might be contrary to God’s will. The persistent situation of violence has disoriented Christians to the extent that they are paranoid and fearful. Violence creates a sense of anxiety and captivity which makes it seem as if God does not care or is not able to protect his people any longer. Fear and anxiety hinder Christians today from discerning the will of God in suffering and pain. For Peter, the solution to anxiety is to cast it upon the Lord, who does care for Christians, Muslims, Traditionalists, atheists and the whole created universe. Peter writes, “Cast all your anxiety on him for he cares for you.”<sup>60</sup> Paul calls this leaving “room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.” Christians need to

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<sup>58</sup> 1 Peter 4:19.

<sup>59</sup> 1 Peter 5:5-6.

<sup>60</sup> 1 Peter 5:7.

believe that although God seems silent, He is absolutely in control. They need reverent submission to God's perfect will, not only waiting upon him but also willingly engaging society in hope for its transformation. God will not act in Christian's favour until they reverence his word that says, "Bless and do not curse."

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