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Kenya

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## Eschatology and the Post-modern Pentecostal Church in Kenya

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper contends that even though the doctrine of eschatology is one of the core teachings of the Christian doctrine, the reality is that it has not always received due attention in the postmodern church. The relegation of this important doctrine to the background of church activity has therefore meant that eschatology has almost been forgotten in church circles. This research sought to establish the interaction of the church with eschatological teachings, beliefs and practices as understood by the pastors, elders/deacons, leaders, and members of Christ Is The Answer Ministries (CITAM).

**Methodology:** The study used mixed methods research design. The target population was the pastors, elders/deacons, leaders, and members of CITAM in two selected assemblies in Nairobi. The assemblies were: CITAM Parklands and CITAM Valley Road. Data was collected from a sample of 68 respondents using stratified sampling technique by use of a questionnaire. The data was then analysed by use of descriptive statistical analysis. Data collected from open-ended sections of the questionnaire were discussed and presented in narrative form.

**Findings:** It was found that the church has done some work as regards to teaching and discussing eschatology. However, the paper also finds that what the church has done to popularize eschatology amongst its members is insufficient and inefficient. More needs to be done in popularizing eschatological themes in church circles.

**Recommendations:** It was recommended that the church should be intentional and committed to doing more in promoting interactions with the doctrine of eschatology. It was also recommended that further studies on the methodologies and ways of systematically inducting eschatology into the everyday church activities and teachings be undertaken.

**Key words:** *Eschatology, Church, Theology, Appraisal, CITAM*

## INTRODUCTION

It is no exaggeration to assert that eschatology is one of the most intriguing and one of the most controversial doctrines in Christendom. The concept of the end of the world has baffled, rattled, and mesmerized our mental faculties for millennia. This is so much so that nearly all human creativity and art has captured some aspects of this theme. Tales have been told, books have been written, songs have been sung, movies have been created and even poems have been crafted on the idea of the end of the world. The imagination that one day the curtains will fall on what we call history has elicited all forms of reactions from human beings.

But what is eschatology? Wayne Grudem in his book *Systematic Theology* writes that eschatology, by a theological definition is the doctrine of future events. The word eschatology originates from the Greek word *eschatos* meaning “last”. ‘The study of eschatology, then, is the study of “the last things”’ (Grudem, 1994, p.1091). Correspondingly, Gyang in his *Compendium of Theology* says it’s ‘the theology and philosophy concerned with what is believed to be final events in the history of the world, or the ultimate destiny of humanity, commonly known as the end of the world’. (Gyang, 2012, p.422). Generally, most people understand eschatology to be the teachings concerning the end of the world.

### The Controversy

One of the foremost aspects of eschatology is its controversial nature. It is acceptable to assert that among all the Christian doctrines, none has divided us more than that of eschatology. In fact, one cannot mention the word eschatology without eliciting a form of controversy. Bloesch in his book: *The last Things: Resurrection, Judgment* writes that “eschatology, perhaps more than any other branch of theology is laden with divisiveness, and this is particularly true in conservative evangelical circles.” (Bloesch, 2004, p.28). J.F Walvoord (1967) further laments the fact that almost utter confusion dominates the interpretation of prophecy with Amillennialists seemingly ignoring the signs of the times and the premillennialists either date-setting or dismissing any imminent hope of the Lord’s return.

The challenges that have bedevilled eschatology have a genesis in the competing views on various elements of the *eschatos*. These include the rapture, the millennium, and the great tribulation. The physical bodily return of Jesus Christ to the earth, a key eschatological event that sets the stage for the roll out of the other events, has also elicited debate as to its nature and timing, and there is divided opinion on which side of the millennium this will happen.

Bloesch (2004) writes that the inherent differences in views have two fundamental causes. Foremost is that the confessions of the faith from antiquity, including those of the times of the reformation did not address eschatological issues. Secondly, eschatology is involved with events outside the parameters of space and time which can only be expressed in a poetic or figurative manner. The lack of unanimity in these doctrines is elicited by a literalizing of the language.

In addition, Archer, Feinberg, Moo and Richard (1984) noted that one of the chief impediments to arriving at a conclusion on issues of theology is the lack of interaction among proponents of competing views. Boettner (1957) in his ground-breaking work on *The Millennium* observed that “the differences arise, not because of any conscious or intended disloyalty to scripture, but primarily because of the distinctive method employed by each system in its interpretation of scripture”.

It is however of fundamental import to reiterate one fact: all the diverse opinions on eschatological matters have their foundation in scripture, and all who espouse contrasting views build their argument on the foundation of God's word. On this fact the theologians forge a united front. Says Boettner: Each of the systems therefore is consistently evangelical, and each has been held by many capable and sincere men (1957).

Moreover, Walvoord (1976) agrees that worthy scholars are found on the different sides of the academic divide. Archer et al in their collective work on *The Rapture* in which each scholar defends a different position wrote: all three of us are wholeheartedly devoted to upholding the clear truths of scripture but we do not believe that the relative time of the rapture is one of these "clear truths" (Archer et, 1984, p.8). In addition, Grudem sees the need to affirm that scholars who are divided on eschatology have a genuine evangelical standing and that all agree on the inerrancy of scripture and commit to "whatever" is taught by the scriptures. Hence, the differences ought to be perceived as being of secondary importance as opposed to disagreements on doctrinal matters of primary importance (Grudem, 1994).

What eschatology encompasses, however, has not been an area of controversy. A consensus exists on the key elements of the eschatos. Pam (2012) elucidated that eschatology consists of the afterlife, Christ's return to the world, the resurrection of all dead, the final judgment, the renewal of creation, Heaven and Hell, the installation of God's kingdom, the fulfilment of all of God's purposes, the consummation of the messianic prophecies and the commencement of the messianic age (Gyang, 2012). Furthermore, Erickson (1949) affirms that eschatology has wrestled with the issues of the consummation of history, the conclusion of God's working in his universe. Moreover, Grudem affirms that all evangelicals have arrived at a consensus that Christ's return will be accompanied by the reward of believers with an eternity in heaven with God while unbelievers will be judged (1994).

### **How The Church Has Treated Eschatology**

In the words of Erickson "The study of eschatology has evoked a variety of responses among believers, ranging from virtual avoidance to total preoccupation with the doctrine" (Erickson, 2006, p.1155). Some being unable to wrap their brains around such a mind-boggling concept have dismissed it altogether, instead recoiling to what they know best. One of the ways this mindset has been captured has been through the coining of the term YOLO (you only live once). It is a common phrase amongst those who have decided to live each day at a time, divorcing themselves from the responsibility of thinking about the unknown future and what ramifications present actions have on such a future.

Others have been so caught up in the idea of preparing for the end times so much so that they have opted to sacrifice the present on the altar of the future. To them, the present life is nothing but a pathway to the future and should not take a significant investment. As far as the phenomenon of the apocalypse is concerned, it is impossible to be neutral, for it is a thought that is always gnawing away on the mind, an inescapable force one cannot elude. In one way or another, everyone is always swinging from one side of this pendulum to the other.

The way the church has treated the doctrine is also neatly divided into those who are enthusiastic about it as well as those who are indifferent to eschatology. As Schwarz argues, there seems to a good mix of both restraint and excitement: "We owe the liberating vision of Christian eschatology to those tempted by passive resignation as well those lured by wishful utopia" (Schwarz, 2000, p.xiii).

It is a general feeling that the church has given the doctrine of eschatology a wide berth. J. Wynn opines that this indispensable doctrine has suffered significant harm, and that preachers have not done it justice. He claims that “something akin to a conspiracy of silence exists among major Protestant denominations in the manner they all but ignore teachings about eschatology” (Wynn, 1965, p.106). He is equally puzzled by the conspicuous absence of eschatological teaching in the church even though lectionaries, church catechisms and traditional creeds are awash with eschatological themes. He perceives that this unusual scenario may be informed by the misrepresentation of biblical eschatological imagery and symbolism that has been used to project a message of damnation and terror to humankind (Wynn, 1965).

M. Vlach is concerned that most churches ‘do not take eschatology seriously’ and in his ‘7 reasons why your church should teach eschatology’, gives some three reasons why most churches neglect studying and teaching eschatology in a serious manner. Foremost, eschatology is a ‘complex’ doctrine. It involves some painstaking work to comb through the many eschatological passages of the Bible and harmonize into one congruent subject. Secondly, the controversial nature of the subject can be confusing, and to quote him, “when we see godly men disagreeing on prophetic issues, it can be disheartening”. Thirdly, eschatology is a complex subject. Many have stumbled on this doctrine; others have abused it and others have become fanatics of the same to the extent of purporting to decipher the date of Christ’s return. Given these extreme scenarios, some people have lost interest in eschatology altogether (Vlach, 2018).

The fear of being in error has also forced many preachers to stay away from the doctrine. Most preachers and pastors have resigned themselves from anything apocalyptic in their sermon contents and have instead left the subject to the ‘experts’.

Coincidentally, the way scholars and book publishers have treated this topic also portrays some prejudice to it. Martin curiously observes that systematic theology textbooks leave the subject in their last chapters “giving the impression they have more to do with “then” than with “now.”” He interprets this to mean that eschatology apparently has little significance in the everyday affairs of churches and believers (Martin, 2016).

### **The Significance of Eschatology to the Current Church**

But is eschatology important in the current era? Is the doctrine of the future things relevant to life in the present? Schwarz is convinced it is: “Christian eschatology is needed today, perhaps even more than ever, to provide for us both a perspective of the future and, even more importantly, a guiding light showing us how to pursue life meaningfully in the present” (Schwarz, 2000, p.ix).

G.K Beale (cited in Why Eschatology is practical for ministry, Martin, 2016) says that “the major doctrines of the Christian faith are charged with eschatological electricity”. The implication therein is that contrary to what many people may think, eschatology has its roots entrenched deep in the major doctrines of the Christian faith. Its significance cannot be overstated, and it is not to be divorced from the other teachings.

A proper understanding of eschatos is therefore indispensable and crucial in shaping the Christian’s life. It is expedient that every believer is properly grounded in this important doctrine, for it forms the base upon which one can properly interact with the various aspects of the Christian life. Gyang Pam underlines this fact in his Compendium of Theology, arguing that eschatology is a core study in the Christian life, for without understanding what the future

holds, we are ignorant of how to live the present life. 'For the Christian faith without a future is bleak, frustrating, foolishness, sorrow and agonizing' (Gyang, 2012, p.422).

B.E Daley projects eschatology as indispensable since it is the final hope of believers. He writes in his book 'The Hope of the Early Church': it is the hope of believing people that the incompleteness of their present experience of God will be resolved, their present thirst for God fulfilled, their present need for release and salvation realized (Daley, 2003, p.1).

Paul actually applied this when he wrote to the persecuted church in Thessalonica, encouraging them to comfort one another with the hope that Christ will bring him those who have died in the last day, and not to mourn like the non-believers 'who have no hope'. H. Balz comments that 'this comfort does not brush aside the grief that the community is experiencing but fortifies them with a solace in mourning which 'others' do not have' (Balz, 1997, p.31).

Is it practical then, to incorporate the doctrine into the contemporary church? Gladd and Harmon have attempted to explore the link between eschatology and pastoral ministry, and have argued that the reality of the inauguration of the kingdom of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ ought to shape pastoral leadership and must also reflect in the life and ministry of the church (Gladd & Harmon, 2016).

Additionally, it has been observed that "Christianity can be shown to have been most practical at several periods when it was most eschatological in mood" (Wynn, 1965, p.110). The place of eschatology in edifying and building up the body of Christ is indispensable. The encouragement and motivation that comes from the teaching and belief in the fact that one day God will create a new system devoid of the weaknesses inherent in current one is a great anchor for them that are going through persecution and suffering.

The early church was heavily dependent on the premise that the Lord would soon bring the world to accountability and more importantly eliminate all forms of injustice, suffering and evil. This was their drive through the tumultuous periods of intense persecution and gross suffering. The hope that the Lord would return victoriously and restore all that they had lost gave the early church the strength to weather their tempestuous voyage on earth.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This paper employed a mixed-methods approach that combines various qualitative and quantitative designs. The study focused on members of CITAM Valley Road and CITAM Parklands in leadership positions or in active ministry. This is because church leaders and ministers are best placed to give feedback on the eschatological position of these churches as they are likely to be more conversant with the church doctrine than members of the laity. They are also required to be more consistently present in church activities hence are more exposed to the content of church preachings, teachings etc. The researcher provided questionnaires designed for members of CITAM Valley Road and CITAM Parklands meant to capture the exposure of the church members to eschatological content in the churches under study. The areas of research interest were the extent to which the assemblies conduct any teachings, trainings or preach sermons on eschatology, the common teachings, notions and beliefs regarding eschatology and the inherent gaps in the eschatological teachings of the church (if any) that need to be addressed. The total target population from the two assemblies was 80 people, a 10% research sample size of the total research population. The sample size comprised of 10 pastors, 5 church elders/deacons, 25 ministry leaders and 40 individuals in church ministry. This is because the elders/deacons are fewer than other ministry leaders and members.

A greater sample size of the pastors was informed by the fact that they are the key players in the preaching and teaching ministry in church. They would therefore have a better grasp of the disposition of the church to eschatology. There are also fewer leaders than members in the various church ministries hence a greater number of members in the sample size than leaders.

The respondents were randomly sampled from the two assemblies since all assemblies of CITAM belong to the same church and standards are the same. The researcher believed that this number would avail the required data that would be representative of the actual population targeted for the study.

Data obtained from the field of research was recorded on papers or filled in an online google form by typing in the responses. The data collected was analysed using Microsoft Excel. It was then presented by use of graphic elements such as tables, graphs, and charts for the purposes of interpretation. The findings were then discussed considering the available literature. Data collected from open-ended sections of the questionnaire were analysed in narrative form according to the content and interpretations made.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The research findings show that church members are familiar with the doctrine of eschatology. This means that the church has to an extent done some eschatological teachings to its members, hence consider eschatology an important doctrine. The frequency and amount of time given to the doctrine is however not considered sufficient. Most respondents indicated that they had not recently come across the teaching in church for a, with many of them also underlining that they rarely encounter the subject.

It was also observed that church members are also familiar with the core teachings of eschatology. Most of the respondents mentioned the major themes of eschatology such as the rapture, judgement, tribulation, the millennium, the beast, heaven and hell, the return of Christ, amongst others. This paper established that myths and misconceptions of eschatology equally persist in the church, and more light needs to be shed to enlighten the congregation on the true biblical position on eschatological matters. Responses indicated that some believers are unable to demarcate between the final judgement of non-believers and the ‘judgement seat of Christ’ which is the judgment of the saints. There is therefore great need to do a proper exposition of this theme so that the church can understand the difference between the two judgements.

Pertaining the question of whether eschatology is relevant today or not, findings revealed that an overwhelming majority consider it relevant. Some people do not however consider eschatology relevant in the present. This could partly be informed by the fact that enough focus has not been given to the subject. It could also be because some believers see eternity as a distant future that has no consequence to life today. Thus, the study proved that there is dire need to have churches teach on this subject.

Regarding the practical steps to take in popularizing eschatology, respondents suggested teaching and preaching in church as the more preferred and effective method. Sermon series, seminars, special classes, preaching about eschatology during burials, weddings, conferences, and other gatherings were also suggested. Drama, media, the creative arts, mission work and social media are other ways through which this goal could be achieved. Small group studies were also strongly recommended for especially discussing the complex aspects of eschatology. This is effective as it allows members to ask questions and clarification on issues they do not

understand. A close interpersonal interaction of teacher and student also helps to entrench the knowledge of the subject.

Most participants in the study expressed a desire to have frequent interactions with eschatological teachings and discussions. This may indicate that many people find eschatology interesting and important. It could also suggest that the current rate at which they hear the subject is not satisfactory and that the congregation considers the topic urgent and critical in shaping the body of Christ.

The study established that all the aspects are considered important and should be all taught, although a slight emphasis should be given to the rapture and the great tribulation. This is not surprising since the study had also established that most of the respondents personally felt they should be enlightened more on the rapture.

Overall, the paper established that there is not enough teaching of eschatology in church, but this is possible to change, if church leadership will take the lead.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study revealed that eschatology is crucial and important Christian doctrine, but is not adequately focused on in church teachings, programs, and activities. The church should therefore be intentional regarding incorporating the teachings in its everyday programs. The department of Christian education at CITAM should plan and execute activities and programs that should be aimed at exposing church members to eschatological themes. A curriculum that covers the prophetic texts of the bible such as Daniel and Revelation should be introduced at the safari group level and run consistently. Frequent seminars and workshops should also be conducted aimed at conducting in depth teaching of eschatology. Teachers and facilitators of this program should also be adequately trained by experts on the subject.

Senior pastors of the assemblies should take active steps to ensure that sermons covering eschatological content are done in the worship service at least quarterly. This could be achieved through adequate planning of the eschatological themes to focus on for each year, and assigning one topic to each quarter. The heads of different departments should also be encouraged to devolve the practice to their team meetings and fellowships. The Sunday school and Youth ministries should also customize the idea to suit their settings so that the subject becomes entrenched in the members at all levels.

It is notable that the church has developed a drama series titled 'Heavens Gates and Hell's Flames' that is dedicated to teaching about the final judgement. I have personally watched the play at Valley Road and seen what the immense impact it has. This is commendable, and the same can be used to a greater extent, especially on the church owned media and online platforms to reach those not able to watch the play in person. Further, Hope TV and Hope FM would serve as effective tools to drive the message of eschatology by airing content relating to the subject. Eschatological movies have traditionally proven to be one of the most vivid reminders on the last things and is an avenue Hope TV could pursue to achieve this milestone.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The paper recommends further studies on the subject. This should cover other assemblies within CITAM, as well as other churches in Kenya to establish whether the status quo is apparent in the Kenyan church in general. There should also be an in-depth study of the methods and means of effectively making eschatology a pertinent element of church programs.



This would inform the church on some of the best strategies to adopt to adequately teach and propagate the doctrine amongst their members.

Eschatology is an important doctrine to the body of Christ. It gives us a proper perspective of life as God views it in the present and grounds us in the hope that one-day God will consummate his plan of redemption for mankind. Based on the prevalent tribulations the church has always faced in this world, the realization that our present predicament will one time be replaced by the grandeur and glory of a perfect life is very motivating and encouraging. To this end, it would always be helpful that the church grabs every opportunity to remind her members that this life is not all there is eternity beckons, and we should be prepared for it.

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