

The Covenantal Kingdom

A Brief Summary
of

The Biblical Argument
for

Postmillennialism

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INTRODUCTION

My interest in eschatology began almost as soon as I became a Christian in the summer of 1971, after graduating from college. A graduate student in psychology at the time, I started attending a small Bible class taught by a dispensational pastor. I still remember the “dispensational charts” the pastor used to explain Biblical prophecy. I enthusiastically accepted dispensational thinking.

After being called to the ministry, I quit my psychology studies and made plans to attend seminary. The Vietnam War was still going on and my number had come up for the draft, so I had to spend two years in the Navy before going on to seminary. During Naval training in San Diego, California, I attended Campus Crusade meetings and heard sermons on prophecy. I will never forget the sermon that explained the Biblical timing of the rapture in terms of the Jews’ return to Israel. Within one generation, forty years from 1948, all the prophecies were to be fulfilled (cf. Mt. 24:34). According to the preacher, the millennium could begin no later than 1988. This meant that the latest possible date for the rapture would be 1981 — an exciting sermon in 1972!

I went to Grace Theological Seminary in January of 1974. In the Navy I had already read Lewis Sperry Chafer’s multi-volume *Systematic Theology* and numerous other dispensational works. At Grace my dispensational faith was deepened, especially my zeal for premillennialism and the pretribulation rapture. I never imagined then that I would or could be converted to postmillennialism.

Moving to Japan in the year of the rapture, 1981, led to various changes in my life. First, the daily confrontation with pagan civilization provoked me to think about the

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cultural significance of Christian faith in a way that I had never before considered. I studied Cornelius Van Til's works on Christian apologetics and epistemology. Since I was looking for a Christian approach to culture, I eventually turned to R. J. Rushdoony's *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, a book I had purchased earlier for my Old Testament studies but had forgotten about.

Even though I found Rushdoony helpful, I never thought that I would accept the postmillennial side of his theology. The Scriptures were too clear, in my opinion. For that reason, I was not afraid to read the postmillennialist literature — I felt that I should at least see what they had to say. To my surprise, postmillennialism not only had a logical appeal on the basis of the Biblical idea of the covenant, it was more faithful to the Scriptures than premillennialism. Postmillennialism even treated the book of Revelation in a more "literal" fashion — that is, more in accord with the normal rules of grammatical and historical interpretation.

In short, I have been convinced that what is called postmillennialism is the teaching of the Bible — this is why I have written this short introduction to postmillennialism. The reader may disagree with me, but I hope that he will read and seriously think about what I have said. If he finds it persuasive, fine. If not, then I hope that he will try to Biblically refute what is written here. The process of theological argumentation is tedious, but if we pursue it in a right spirit, the aim is that the whole Church of Jesus Christ may "come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13) — a goal, by the way, that the postmillennialist is certain will *someday* be achieved.

Four points in the eschatological debate seem especially important to me. I have written a chapter about each one. First, in an article in the *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Greg Bahnsen defines the fundamental theological and Biblical questions better than anything I have read. Chapter one, based upon Bahnsen's essay, attempts to clarify the theological issues and prompt the reader to rethink his eschatology.

The second chapter is devoted to the question of interpretation. I have relied

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especially on James Jordan's insightful discussions of Biblical interpretation and David Chilton's introduction to eschatology, *Paradise Restored*. Jordan's approach to interpretation, which Chilton follows, opened up the eschatological debate for me. As a dispensationalist, I had been convinced of what is referred to as "literal interpretation." James Jordan has demonstrated the fallacy of the dispensationalist's so-called "literal interpretation" and shown the way to *a more truly literal and Biblical approach to interpretation*.

Chapter three deals with the broader Biblical issue of the great conflict of history. Every Christian knows that the Bible presents history as a conflict between God and Satan. All Christians believe that God wins this conflict at the Day of Judgment. But who wins *within* history? Does Satan win only to be overwhelmed by Omnipotence in the end? Or is it God's purpose to be victorious in history? If so, we also need to ask, what are God's methods of fighting this temporal battle? I argue that from Genesis to Revelation God's method of fighting Satan is consistent. I also argue that God will win in history as well as at the Last Day. The final destruction of Satan is based upon the judgment of the Cross and the subsequent total defeat of Satanism in history.

The final chapter is in some ways the most important. I deal with the Biblical teaching of the covenant and its implications for eschatology. Although traditional Reformed theology and modern Biblical scholarship have both emphasized the centrality of the covenant idea in the Bible, the eschatology debate has largely ignored it. Chapter four is based upon the work of Ray Sutton, whose contributions to the doctrine of the covenant enable us to develop the eschatological implications of the covenant with clarity.

Eschatology is not an abstract subject with little relevance for our Christian witness and labor in this world. How we view eschatology not only determines our view of history, it also determines our view of everyday life in the present age. What are we living for? What kinds of goals ought we as Christians to pursue? What is the ultimate meaning of our labor in history? To be specific, should we invest our time, money and labor in projects that may take over 100 years to complete, that require sophisticated knowledge and technical ability, and that "preach the Gospel" in a far less direct manner than passing out tracts? Is the ultimate meaning of our historical labor simply found in the number of people that we win to Christ, or does educational,

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scientific, artistic, political, and industrial work have *ultimate* meaning for a Christian also?

These and many other questions that touch our daily life find their answers in our eschatological beliefs. It is this connection with everyday life which makes the eschatological debate *inescapable* — for without answers to future questions, we cannot know how we ought to serve God in the present, like politicians without a program or a plan who daily change national policy according to the results of the polls. It is not God's will that we, like them, be "tossed to and fro with every wind." In His word He has revealed all that we need to know so that we may live "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever," beginning now.

Soli Deo Gloria

Chapter One

THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

Debates on eschatology tend to be confusing. There is, of course, a vast amount of Scripture to be dealt with, and the passages to be interpreted are admittedly sometimes complex. Add to this a long history of theological debate, and it is easy to see why the subject of eschatology can be bewildering. But it doesn't have to be this way, as we shall see.

Defining the Issues

Three Positions

There are three basic positions regarding *the time* of the second coming of Christ. **Premillennialism** teaches that Christ returns *before* the end of history to inaugurate an earthly kingdom of a thousand years. **Amillennialism** denies an earthly kingdom age and says the coming of Christ is the end of history. **Postmillennialism** agrees with amillennialism that the coming of Christ ends history. It also agrees with premillennialism that there will be a kingdom of God on earth and in time. However, the postmillennialist believes that Christ will bring in His kingdom through the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and then return to this world at the end of the history when God's kingdom purposes have been fully realized.

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Two Theological Questions

Greg Bahnsen has narrowed the eschatological debate to two specific theological questions.¹

Question 1: “Is the church age inclusive of the millennium?

(Alternatively: Will the end-time events of Christ’s return, the resurrection, and judgment synchronize with each other?)”²

To this question the premillennialist answers, “No.” For the premillennialist, the church age is distinct from the future millennium. Christ returns at the end of the church age to inaugurate the millennium. The final resurrection and judgment occur a thousand years later.

Both the amillennialist and postmillennialist answer, “Yes.” Though for different reasons, these positions agree the Bible teaches that the final judgment, resurrection, and return of Christ synchronize with each other. The millennium for the amillennialist occurs in heaven during the church age. For the postmillennialist the millennium is the final era of the church age.

Question 2: “Will the church age (identical with or inclusive of the millennial kingdom) be a time of evident prosperity for the Gospel on earth, with the church achieving worldwide growth and influence such that Christianity becomes the general principle rather than the exception to the rule (as in previous times)?”³

To this question both the premillennialist and amillennialist answer, “No.” They agree that the Gospel will never be victorious in history. The postmillennialist answers, “Yes.” He believes that the command of Christ guarantees the victory of the Gospel.

1. Greg Bahnsen, “The *Prima Facie* Acceptability of Postmillennialism” in *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Winter 1976-77, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 64ff..

2. Ibid., p. 65.

3. Ibid.

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If the postmillennialist can demonstrate that, according to the Bible, the coming of Christ is at the end of history (including the end-time events of the resurrection and judgment), he will have proved his position against the premillennialist. If he can demonstrate that the Gospel of Christ will be victorious within history, resulting in the conversion of the majority of the human race and leading to an age of unparalleled blessing, he will have proved the correctness of his position in contrast to the amillennialist.⁴

The eschatological debate, therefore, is less complicated than it may seem at first. Just two straightforward questions: 1) Does Christ return at the end of history? 2) Will the Holy Spirit succeed in converting the majority of the human race by the Gospel? Answer these questions Biblically, and eschatology is saved from the rhetorical fog of endless theological disputation. The postmillennialist believes the Biblical answers to these two simple but theologically decisive questions demonstrate the truth of the postmillennial position.

Biblical Answer: The Victory of the Gospel

We begin with the second question: Will the church age be a time of evident prosperity for the Gospel on earth? The postmillennialist agrees with the premillennialist that the many promises in the Old Testament of an age of great blessing on earth will be fulfilled. Both sides also agree that the promises will be fulfilled at a time when men are evidently still in mortal bodies, for sin and death are still facts of life, even when human societies are enjoying the fullest measure of earthly blessing the Gospel will ever bring (Is. 65:20).⁵

4. Of course, the premillennial position would also be refuted by Scriptural evidence of the global success of the Gospel. As Bahnsen also points out, these two points can be further reduced to the single issue of the success of the Gospel. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

5. Note Amillennialist Hoekema's unsuccessful attempt to interpret this passage in *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 202 ff. Gary North demonstrates clearly that an amillennial interpretation of this passage is

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In contrast with the premillennialist, the postmillennialist believes these blessings are brought about not by the return of Christ, but by the work of the Holy Spirit⁶ through the Gospel in the church age. How can the postmillennialist demonstrate *Biblically* that the blessings of God's kingdom come through the spread of the Gospel before the second coming of Christ?

Matthew 28:18-20

To begin with, the postmillennialist sees in the Great Commission a promise of success.⁷ Consider the preface to the Great Commission. Jesus said, "All authority is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Mt. 28:18). Note that Christ claims not only authority in heaven, but all authority on earth as well. This is a clear assertion of His sovereignty over earth's history. It also means, of course, that Jesus' commission to

impossible. *Millennialism and Social Theory* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), pp. 98-106.

6. Note that postmillennialists believe that the kingdom is brought in by God, not man. It is the work of the Spirit through the Church. C. C. Ryrie falsely asserts that postmillennialism believes that the kingdom is brought in by the work of man: C. C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), pp. 13-14. Postmillennialists are not talking about a natural process or merely human effort, but about supernatural regeneration as the foundation of the kingdom. If the Spirit of God does not regenerate the world, there will be no kingdom of God in history — premil or postmil.

7. See Kenneth J. Gentry Jr., "The Greatness of the Great Commission," in Gary North, ed., *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Vol 7, No. 2, Winter, 1981 (Vallecito, California: Chalcedon, 1981), pp. 19-47; and Gary DeMar and Peter Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity*, (Ft. Worth, Texas: Dominion Press, 1988), pp. 178-85. I have concentrated in the above paragraphs on the promise associated with the commission, but the commission itself implies the worldwide conquest of the Gospel also, inasmuch as we are commanded to "disciple all the nations." For a detailed book-length explanation of the Great Commission, see Kenneth J. Gentry Jr., *The Greatness of the Great Commission* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990).

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His Church is backed by His own supreme and unimpeachable authority. Why did Jesus assure us He has all authority *in heaven* and *on earth*, and then promise us that He Himself, the sovereign Lord, would be with us? Was it not to give us assurance that we should accomplish the task by His grace? No other interpretation does justice to the Biblical parallels or to the immediate context of Jesus' resurrection victory.

Next, consider the last words of Jesus' command to the Church: "[L]o, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Mt. 28:20). Just as the Lord told Joshua He would be with him and not leave or forsake him (Josh. 1:5-9), Christ has assured the Church that He will always be with her, even to the end of the age. Christians agree that God's promise to be with Joshua is a guarantee of his success. Why is it, then, that only postmillennialists believe Jesus' promise to the Church, that she will be enabled by His power to accomplish the great task to which He called her? *If this is not the meaning of the promise of His presence, what does that promise mean?*

But there is more. The promise of Christ's presence in the Great Commission is the fulfillment of Jesus' name as Matthew records it: "they shall call his name Immanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us" (Mt. 1:23; cf. Is. 7:14). Matthew records that Jesus is the One who fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah who is "God with us." The Immanuel promise in the Old Testament expresses the very essence of the covenant grace of God. God's presence assures the outward and eternal prosperity of His covenant people. It is God's presence that His people seek as the essence of covenantal blessing (cf. Ps. 27:4). Thus God promises Isaac, "Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee; for unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I sware unto Abraham thy father" (Gn. 26:3). God's presence guarantees His blessing.

When Jesus said, "[L]o, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world," He was pointing to the very meaning of His coming as Immanuel: that the presence of God assures the victory of His covenantally faithful people.⁸

8. See Gn. 26:3, 24, 28; 28:15, 20; 31:3; 39:2, 3, 21, 23; 48:21; Ex. 3:12; 10:10; 18:19; 20:20; Nm. 14:9; 16:3; 23:21; Dt. 32:12; Josh. 1:5, 9, 17; 3:7; 6:27; 22:31; Jdg. 1:19, 22; 6:12, 13, 16; Rth. 2:4; 1 Sm. 3:19; 10:7; 14:7; 16:18; 17:37; 18:12, 14, 28; 20:13; 2 Sm. 7:3; 14:17; 1 Kg. 1:37; 8:57; 11:38; 2 Kg. 3:12; 10:15; 18:7; 1 Chr. 9:20; 17:2; 22:11; 16; 28:20; 2 Chr. 1:1;

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Christians are to believe that His command carries with it the power for its accomplishment. As God said to Joshua, “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Josh. 1:9).⁹ Christians must also “be strong and of good courage” because we know God’s promise and presence cannot fail. We must preach the Gospel with the confidence that God will prosper His Word and build His kingdom according to His covenant promise. With His presence the Church cannot fail!

Romans 11

Romans 11 is a central passage on the extension of the Gospel. It is not, as some hold, a discourse on the second coming of Christ. Paul outlines the progress of the Gospel in three general stages. First, Israel as a whole having rejected Christ, a remnant of the Jews and a large number of Gentiles are converted to faith in Christ. Second, God’s evident blessing on Christian Gentiles eventually provokes the Jews to jealousy and becomes the means of leading them to faith in the Gospel.¹⁰ Third, the conversion of Israel results in the salvation of the world. Paul says nothing here of Christ’s return; he is only speaking of the growth and influence of the Gospel. According to Paul, the progress of the Gospel will bring about the salvation of the world.¹¹

13:12; 15:2, 9; 17:3; 19:11; 20:17; 36:23; Ezr. 1:3; Ps. 118:6, 7; Is. 8:10; 41:10; 43:2, 5; 45:14; Jer. 1:8, 19; 15:20; 20:11; 30:11; 42:11; 46:28; Zph. 3:17; Hag. 1:13; 2:4; Zch. 8:23; 10:5; and in the New Testament, cf. also: Mt. 1:23; Lk. 1:28; Acts 7:9; 10:38; 18:10; 2 Thes. 3:16; 2 Tim. 4:22; Rev. 21:3.

9. Cf. Acts 13:47, “For so the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have sent you to be a light to the Gentiles, that you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.’ ”

10. The reader will note that postmillennialists do believe in the fulfillment of the Old and New Testament promises that Israel will be saved. The mystery of the Gospel includes the idea, however, that the Gentiles and Jews will be one body in Christ.

11. See the fuller discussion of the postmillennial order of development in Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God’s Program for Victory* (Tyler, Texas: Dominion Press, third edition, 1988), pp. 335-47. On the future conversion of Israel in

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Matthew 13

The kingdom parables of Matthew 13 also point unmistakably to the gradual growth and progress of the Gospel until the final coming of the Lord.¹² A brief look at these parables will demonstrate that, according to the teaching of Jesus, the characteristic of the present era is gradual and imperfect growth of the kingdom until the end of history. The source of this growth is identified in the first parable: "the seed is the Word of God" (Lk. 8:11). The overall perspective is simple. God's Word, the Gospel, brings about the growth of God's kingdom until the end of history, when Jesus returns.

In the first parable Jesus describes four soils into which are planted the seed of the Word of God. Only one of those soils is good; the other three do not bear fruit. The point of this parable, however, is not that twenty-five percent of all those who hear the Gospel will be saved. What Jesus teaches here is that, while there are both those who show no interest from the start (the seed sown by the wayside) and those who have only a temporary and false faith (the seed sown on stony ground and the seed sown among thorns), there will also certainly be those who respond to the Gospel message. These people will bear fruit.¹³ This is the distinguishing characteristic of the true Christian (cf. John 15:1-16). Ask yourself this question: "If true Christians bear fruit —

Romans 11, see David Chilton, *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion* (Ft. Worth, Texas: Dominion Press, 1985), pp. 125-31. For a detailed study of Romans 11 consult John Murray's commentary on Romans in the *New International Commentary*, and commentaries by Matthew Henry, Robert Haldane, and Charles Hodge.

12. Cf. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender*, pp. 309ff; *Dominion and Common Grace* (Tyler Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987), pp. 65-68; *Moses and Pharaoh: Dominion Religion versus Power Religion* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985), pp. 158-172; David Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, pp. 73-75; and John Jefferson Davis, *Christ's Victorious Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), pp 49-52. For an extended discussion of the interpretation of these parables, though from an amillennial perspective, also see Herman Ridderbos *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962).

13. Note also that Christ indicates this parable is the key to the others (Mar. 4:13).

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including the blessing of seeing men and women converted — and non-Christians and false Christians do not, who will be numerically greater in the long run?"

The next parable, the wheat and the tares, appears to be a logical development of the first parable. In the parable of the soils only one of four soils represents true Christians. Two soils represent false Christians, those who "believe for a while" (Lk. 8:13). We are left, then, with the question, "What should the Church do about false Christians who temporarily look like true believers?" The answer, given by the second parable, is to leave them alone until the end of the age when the Lord Himself will judge (Mt. 13:30).¹⁴

This parable indicates there will be no global, miraculous, divine judgment (as in the days of Noah, for example) until the end of history. There is no great discontinuity, like the rapture or the return of Christ, until the very end. The kingdom is not heaven; it is not a perfect place (Mt. 13:47-50). But this imperfect kingdom will be perfected in the end. This is an important instruction for those who live on earth during the kingdom age, for it is easy to be overcome by utopian desires. Our Lord, however, forbids us from hastening, as it were, the last judgment. Vengeance belongs to God. He will have His vengeance at the end . . . for the kingdom of heaven consummates in final judgment (Mt. 13:49-50).

The exhortation to wait for Christ's final judgment seems to raise another problem. If Christians ignore the false brethren planted among them by Satan, it would threaten to undermine the Church's work for God's kingdom. What can the Church accomplish with such a mixed multitude? Will the preaching of the Gospel result in nothing more than an ambiguous mixture of tares and wheat? This problem is answered by two parables, the parable of the mustard seed (Mt. 13:31-32) and the parable of the leaven (Mt. 13:33). Both guarantee the kingdom of God will:

1. grow into a great tree in which the birds, the kingdoms of the world, will make their nest (cf. Eze. 17:22-24; 31:2-9; Dn. 4:10-12);
2. like leaven in bread, eventually leaven the whole earth.¹⁵

14. This is not to imply that the church does not or should not discipline its members. It does imply that church discipline, even in "believers' baptism" churches, can never be so perfect that tares do not infiltrate.

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In other words, the Word of God sown by the Son of Man (Mt. 13:37), though it does not convert every individual man and woman, will gradually spread through all the earth and bring all nations to rest in Christ. The kingdom of God comes through the preaching of the Gospel. Christ, to whom all authority in heaven and earth has been given, is with us. It is He who builds His Church, and the gates of hell will not be able to withstand His assault.¹⁶

Together, these parables — which leading dispensationalists admit refer to the present age¹⁷ — teach the gradual growth of the kingdom of God. This growth is achieved by the difficult but in the end always fruitful labor of preaching the Gospel. The kingdom of heaven ends in the final judgment at the second coming of Christ, when the wicked are cast into hell and the righteous enter eternal bliss.

Daniel 2 and 7

Jesus' teaching in the kingdom parables of Matthew 13 corresponds to the outline of history given in the visions of Daniel the prophet (Dn. 2:31-45; 7:1-28). Daniel concentrates on two aspects of God's kingdom: 1) the gradual growth of the kingdom and 2) its starting point — Christ's ascension to God (Dan 7:13). If the kingdom begins

15. Dispensationalists often insist the leaven here must be a symbol of evil, because it is used as a symbol of evil in other passages (cf. Mt. 16:6, 12; 1 Cor. 5:6-9; Gal 5:9). But Jesus clearly says "the kingdom of heaven is like leaven" (Mt. 13:33), and the entire passage is dealing with the growth of God's kingdom. The relevant hermeneutical rule here is, "When all else fails, read the context." For an extended discussion of leaven in Biblical symbolism, see Gary North, *Moses and Pharaoh*, pp. 158-76.

16. For the correct interpretation of Mt. 16:18 and its relation to the book of Revelation see David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* (Fort Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), pp. 313-14.

17. See John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), p. 288, etc.; Herman A. Hoyt, *The End Times* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), p. 88, 89, etc.; Charles L. Feinberg, *Millennialism* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1936] 1980), p. 149, etc.

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at the resurrection and ascension of Christ and grows gradually through history, as Daniel shows, then the means of growth can only be the seed of God's Word. Jesus Himself points back to Daniel when He tells us that the one who sows the good seed is Daniel's "Son of Man" (Mt. 13:37).

Daniel first understood the course of history when he interpreted the dream of the king of Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar saw a vision of a great image with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, and legs partly of iron and partly of clay (Dn. 2:32-33). This great image was destroyed by a stone cut without hands, which subsequently grew into a great mountain that filled the earth. Daniel explained the meaning of the dream to Nebuchadnezzar: Four powerful kingdoms — the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman — would dominate the history of the world, until the God of heaven Himself sets up a new kingdom which will never be destroyed (Dan 2:36-45).

It is explicitly stated that the kingdom of God would be set up in the days of the Roman Empire (Dan 2:44). Dispensational premillennialists must introduce a break¹⁸ of at least two thousand years somewhere in the legs of the vision. The dispensational "gap-theory" interpretation, however, is pure speculation — an imposition upon the text that is contrary to its plain, normal, literal meaning.

When, at a later time, Daniel himself sees essentially the same vision, the four empires are represented by four beasts rather than a grand human image (Dn. 7:3ff.).

18. John F. Walvoord sees the prophecy about the image being fulfilled in the past, except the prophecy concerning stone falling on the foot of the image, which he regards as future. "In view of the very accurate portrayal of preceding history by the image, it is a reasonable and natural conclusion that the feet stage of the image including destruction by the stone is still future and unfulfilled." *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971). This "gap-theory" interpretation, which requires the expositor to insert an interval of at least two thousand years between the legs and the feet, in addition to making the image rather unstable, is a highly unnatural reading of the text, for there are no indications of such a gap in the context, nor of any gaps between the other empires prophesied. It should be pointed out that not all dispensationalists favor the "gap-theory" interpretation. See Robert D. Culver, *Daniel and the Latter Days* (Chicago: Moody Press, revised edition, 1977), pp. 118, 124ff.

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indicating the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian perspective on these kingdoms. In Daniel's vision, the kingdoms of man end, as in Nebuchadnezzar's vision in chapter 2, when God sets up His kingdom (Dn. 7:9-14). Again *the timing is clear* — Christ receives the kingdom at His ascension to God: "[B]ehold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and *came to the Ancient of days*, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed" (Dn. 7:13). That Christ became King and Lord at His resurrection and ascension is the clear and repeated teaching of the New Testament as well (Mk. 16:19; Lk. 22:69; Acts 2:25-36; 7:55-56; 13:33; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20-22; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22).¹⁹

Summary

This is only a brief summary of the testimony of a few important Scriptures. Even so, it is evident that where the Bible gives an outline of the progress of history, it points to three important truths. One, the kingdom of God grows gradually (Mt. 13; Rom. 11; Dn. 2, 7). Two, the kingdom of God grows through the preaching of the

19. It is also interesting to note that Daniel says nothing in this passage of Christ returning to the earth to exercise dominion. On the contrary, the repeated emphasis is that the saints will rule (Dn. 7:18, 22, 27). But the rule of the saints is the rule of Christ in and through them (cf. Dn. 7:27).

Walvoord does not seem to notice that Christ is here coming on the clouds to God and not to the earth, *Ibid.*, pp. 166-70. Wood, too, appears to be unaware of the possibility that this refers to the ascension of Christ. See Leon Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), pp. 192-94. What is true of the Dispensational commentaries is also true of their standard works on eschatology. It has not occurred to them that Daniel sees Jesus ascending to God. See J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972, ninth printing), pp. 102, 318, 443, 479, 491, 497; Herman A. Hoyt, *The End Times* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), pp. 56, 59, 183, 184; and John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, 1959), p. 267.

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Gospel — the seed of the Word that will convert Israel and the whole world according to the promise of the resurrected Christ (Mt. 28:18-20; Rom. 11; Mt. 13). Three, the kingdom begins at the resurrection and ascension of Christ (Dn 2, 7; Mt. 28:18-20 and many other New Testament passages). These three Scriptural truths are the Biblical basis for the postmillennial hope. Neither premillennialism nor amillennialism fits the Scriptural teaching of the kingdom.

Biblical Answer: Second Coming and Resurrection

By answering Bahnsen's second question we have already demonstrated that the Biblical witness points to postmillennialism. Nevertheless, it is important to consider Bahnsen's first question also — "Is the church age inclusive of the millennium?" (In other words, does the second coming of Christ bring the end of history?). If the church age includes the millennium, then premillennialism, the most popular millennial position today, is proven doubly wrong.

Teaching of Jesus

There is a wealth of New Testament evidence pointing to one general resurrection at the end of history.²⁰ Jesus says four times in John 6:38-54 that He will resurrect His people on the last day. He had already stated in a previous encounter with the Jews that the resurrection of the righteous and the unrighteous would occur together: "Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (Jn. 5:28-29). In a single time period ("the hour"), the entire human race will hear Christ's voice and come forth from the grave ("all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth"). After the resurrection, the people will be divided on ethical lines between those who have done good and those who have done evil.

20. See the very interesting explanation of the day of the Lord and the resurrection in David Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, pp. 133-48.

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There is no dispensational division of Jews, Gentiles, and the Church. Neither are there two resurrections as the dispensationalists teach. There is only one resurrection — but with two different destinations.

Teaching of Paul

Paul referred to the same single resurrection when he confessed his faith that “There shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked” (Acts 24:15). In another place, the apostle Paul taught that all the dead in Christ would be raised and the living would be translated at the sound of the last trumpet (1 Thes. 4:13-17; 1 Cor. 15:52-58). This is the final defeat of death and the end of its reign (1 Cor. 15:54-58). It is also the end of history and the beginning of eternal life in heaven, for Paul teaches that the last enemy which will be defeated is death (1 Cor. 15:25-26).²¹

Perhaps the most lucid statement concerning the time of the resurrection is Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28.²² Here Paul states that the resurrection of the dead takes place in two stages: first, the resurrection of Jesus Christ Himself; second, the resurrection of those who are Christ’s (1 Cor. 15:23). Paul speaks of the resurrection of God’s people as the defeat of their great enemy, death (1 Cor. 15:26). He expressly states that Christ, who is ruling now, “must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his

21. Dispensationalists deny the plain and straightforward implications of these and other passages by introducing numerous distinctions. The basis for the dispensationalist distinctions between the various judgments and resurrections, however, is grounded in their theological presuppositions, not in sound exegesis of the passages themselves. Their main text is Revelation 20. Distinctions introduced into the teaching of Jesus and Paul are clearly based upon their interpretation of Revelation. For an extended discussion of the interpretation of Revelation 20, see David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*. I believe that in the New Testament teaching about the final judgement and resurrection we see another example of postmillennialism being more “literal” than dispensationalism.

22. For an extended discussion of 1 Cor. 15:23-28 that compares the premillennial and amillennial/postmillennial interpretation, see Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1930] 1979). Cf. also *Paradise Restored*, p. 145f.

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feet" (1 Cor. 15:25),²³ including the last enemy which is death itself (1 Cor. 15:26). Death is defeated with the resurrection of Christ's people at the end of history when Christ delivers the kingdom to God (1 Cor. 15:24, 27-28).²⁴

The implications of this passage are inescapable. The language is clear and free of symbolism. The only real question this passage raises is this: Why do premillennialists ignore the straightforward teaching of the central New Testament chapter on the resurrection and build a doctrine of the resurrection on what they consider to be the implications of figures of speech?

Summary

The explicit teaching of Jesus and Paul points to a single resurrection at the end of history. It is a principle of interpretation that we must use the simple and clear passages of Scripture to aid us in understanding the more difficult figurative language. In the Gospels and the Epistles, we have the simple but seldom-used key to the book of Revelation and the "secrets" of Biblical eschatology.

Conclusion

The eschatological debate is clouded by dispute over difficult passages of Scripture and by failure to clearly define the issues. Greg Bahnsen defines the central and decisive theological issues so that the eschatological questions can be clearly answered from the teaching of the Bible. There are just two questions that must be answered: 1) Does the resurrection of the righteous take place at the end of history? 2) Will the Gospel conquer the world? The prophecy of Daniel, the parables of Christ, the Great Commission, John 6, Romans 11, 1 Corinthians 15, and many other Scriptures answer

23. Cf. Acts 2:34-35 where Peter also refers to this verse.

24. Pentecost's extensive discussion of verses 20-24 is conducted as if verse 25-28 do not exist. But verse 25, beginning with the word "for," is Paul's exposition of the previous verses. It can hardly be ignored! A later discussion of verses 24-28 is conducted as if the passage did not begin with a discussion of resurrection. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 402-7 and 492-94.

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these questions affirmatively. Of the three major eschatological approaches, only the postmillennial interpretation accords with the witness of the Bible.

The more difficult prophetic portions of Scripture, especially the book of Revelation, should be interpreted in light of our answers to these questions. But we must be on guard against forcing our interpretation into an unbiblical mold to fit our preconceived ideas. The teachings of Christ and Paul clearly point to both the success of the Gospel in converting the world, and a single judgment and resurrection at the end of history. We must continue to pursue a Biblical approach in the interpretation of the more difficult eschatological passages. Does the book of Revelation teach the postmillennial view? How should we interpret its symbolic language?

Chapter Two

INTERPRETING PROPHECY

Many believe Christians differ in their eschatology because they use different principles of interpretation.¹ Premillennial dispensationalists in particular emphasize that they consistently interpret the Scriptures “literally,” while others “spiritualize” or use “figurative interpretation.” Many amillennialists and postmillennialists argue that no one can interpret “literally” all the time and insist that the New Testament “spiritualizes” certain Old Testament passages,² thus seeming to endorse the dispensationalist view that differences among the schools are based upon different hermeneutical approaches.

The idea that the various millennial positions are the result of different principles of interpretation confuses the real problem for three reasons. One, dispensational premillennialists do not interpret “literally.” Two, postmillennialists do not “spiritualize” the eschatological portions of Scripture. Three, the real hermeneutical problem is something entirely different.

1. In a debate among the four major millennial positions — historic premil, dispensational premil, postmil, and amil — all four participants repeatedly stressed the importance of hermeneutics (principles of interpretation). Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977).

2. *The Meaning of the Millennium*, pp. 134ff., 172ff.

Figurative vs. Literal Interpretation: The Wrong Paradigm

Since dispensationalists understand the basic issue to be hermeneutics, they typically include long discussions of the interpretation of prophecy in their books on eschatology.³ Dispensational premillennialists argue that amillennialists and postmillennialists use a method of interpretation which forces a non-literal meaning on what is intended by the Bible to be literal. J. Dwight Pentecost goes so far as to say, “The reason a non-literal method of interpretation is adopted is, almost without exception, because of a desire to avoid the obvious interpretation of the passage. The desire to bring the teaching of Scripture into harmony with some predetermined system of doctrine instead of bringing doctrine into harmony with the Scriptures has kept the method alive.”⁴

Pentecost’s statement reflects the dispensational prejudice that non-dispensationalists use a non-literal and, therefore, dishonest method of interpreting Scripture. But what about dispensationalists? Do they really interpret “literally”? When a well-known dispensational Bible teacher of a previous generation, Louis S. Bauman, named socialism, communism, and fascism as the “three unclean spirits like frogs” of Revelation 16:13, was he interpreting literally?⁵ How literal is it to say, as John F. Walvoord cautiously suggests, that the apostle John’s description of an army of horsemen in Revelation 9:16-19 refers to modern warfare?⁶ A popular premillennial teacher in the early part of this century even announced the year for the

3. See J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958, 1972), pp. 1-64; Charles L. Feinberg, *Millennialism: The Two Major Views* (Chicago: Moody Press, revised edition, 1980), pp. 37-62; John F. Walvoord discusses amillennial and premillennial principles of interpretation separately in *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959, 1972), pp. 59-67, 128-138. Paul L. Tan devoted an entire book to the subject, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books, Inc., 1974).

4. *Things To Come*, p. 60.

5. Quoted in Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now!: The Premillennarian Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), p. 108.

6. *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), pp. 166-67. Herman Hoyt does not favor Walvoord’s interpretation here, but he says, “Tanks, machine guns, flame throwers, and many other varieties of modern warfare so easily fit the imagery.” *An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Brethren Missionary Herald Company, 1966), p. 51.

beginning of the literal fulfillment of Revelation — 1925!⁷ More recently, a best-selling book by a dispensational author proved by no less than 88 literal reasons that the rapture must occur in 1988. When the rapture didn't occur, the same author then proved that the rapture would occur in 1989.⁸ (Don't hold your breath for his next best-selling book!) Dispensational commentary on prophecy abounds with examples of non-literal and, too often, nonsensical interpretation. The point is dispensationalists do not really practice "literal" interpretation.

In their better moments, dispensationalists recognize the problem. In a debate on eschatology, Lorainne Boettner challenged the dispensational idea that prophecy must be interpreted "literally," by citing Genesis 3:15, among other references. In this passage the prophecy that Christ would incur serious injury in the process of defeating Satan is couched in figurative language. Speaking to the serpent, God says, "He [the seed of the woman] shall bruise your head. And you shall bruise His heel." As Boettner pointed out, dispensationalists do not usually interpret this to be a principle of enmity between man and snakes. But what Boettner here called "figurative interpretation," the premillennialist Herman Hoyt called "literal interpretation," for, Hoyt explained, "literal interpretation" is just "normal interpretation" and does not exclude recognition of figurative language.⁹

In other words, what the amillennialist and the postmillennialist would call "figurative interpretation" is often, if not always, included within the premillennialist's definition of "literal interpretation." The supposed difference in hermeneutical approaches is a matter of language rather than principles. In fact, most of the hermeneutical principles dispensationalists stress would be agreed upon by everyone. Evangelical amillennialists and postmillennialists agree that interpretation

7. *Armageddon Now!*, pp. 63-64.

8. See Gary North, *Rapture Fever: Why Dispensationalism Is Paralyzed* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1993), 53-54, 189-190. Both Wilson's book, referred to above, and North's contain numerous examples of sensationalistic (and money-making!) interpretation in the name of literalism.

9. *The Meaning of the Millennium*, pp. 147-48. Cf. also Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1987), where he explains the extensive dispensational use of "figurative interpretation" in historical passages of Scripture, and the use of special terms like "application" rather than "interpretation" to give them more breadth in treating the prophetic Scriptures.

should be grammatical and historical, which is what premillennialists mean by “literal.” Premillennialists imply, however, that amillennialists and postmillennialists use a method of interpretation which forces a figurative meaning on what is intended to be non-figurative language. This is a gross misrepresentation of the issue.

The real issue is not “figurative” and “literal” *interpretation*. No postmillennialist (or amillennialist) is attempting to impose his own ideas onto the Scriptures by changing literal language into figurative language.¹⁰ Premillennialists recognize that the Bible contains difficult symbolic language. They call their interpretation “literal,” but they have not dealt systematically with the Bible’s own use of symbolic language. What they really give us is an interpretation which seems “literal,” because it conforms to our own cultural life and thought. They have neglected the real hermeneutical question: What is the place of figurative language and symbolism in the Bible? What all Christians should be searching for are Biblical guidelines for understanding the figurative language of the Bible.

Creation Symbolism: The Biblical Paradigm

Considering the place of figurative language in the Bible allows us to study the whole debate from a different perspective. We are looking for the Bible’s own guidelines for understanding the Bible’s own language. The problem is not merely with the prophetic Scriptures — figures of speech also occur frequently in the historical and poetical books. We need an approach to figurative language that relates all the strands of Biblical literature, an approach that is clear, consistent, and grounded in the Bible itself.

10. There is a very important distinction between recognizing and interpreting figurative language in the Bible, and allegorizing the Scriptures. There was a problem in the early church, particularly in the Alexandrian tradition stemming from Origen, of forcing alien meanings onto Scriptural texts. But this “allegorical interpretation” was clearly opposed by theologians of the Antiochene school, led by Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Theodoret. The “typological” method employed by the Antiochenes, while sometimes tainted by “allegorical” interpretation, is “normal” interpretation of the Scriptures. See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A & C Black: 1958, 1989), pp. 69-78.

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The Biblical doctrine of creation provides a theological and linguistic foundation that is comprehensive and consistent. A creationist hermeneutics can unite the various types of Bible literature and the figures of speech which occur in them. Biblical scholar James Jordan offers a systematic approach to the Bible's use of figurative language, *grounded in the doctrine of creation.*¹¹ He treats symbolism as a central issue in understanding the Scriptures, based upon the doctrine of creation.

In his manifesto on Biblical symbolism, Jordan makes the following rather surprising statement.

Symbolism is more important than anything else for the life of man. Anyone who does not understand this has [not] yet fully come to grips with the philosophy of Cornelius Van Til, or more importantly, with the Biblical doctrine of creation.¹²

Jordan explains that the doctrine of creation means the created order as a whole reflects the Creator Himself.¹³ The entire creation, as a whole and in detail, points to God and is, thus, a sign or symbol of God. This perspective — that the whole created

11. Jordan's work is especially important in that it is a further extension of Cornelius Van Til's epistemology. Though Van Til himself taught that all of life must be known and lived in submission to the Word of God, his categories of explaining the teaching of the Scriptures were taken from philosophy rather than the Bible. Of course, explaining the teaching of the Bible in philosophical categories is not wrong. Jordan, however, by expounding the Biblical worldview in terms of the Bible's own system of symbolism, has made the doctrine of creation normative for the methodology and content of our worldview. If nothing else, this approach is much easier for most Christians to understand. It has the further advantage of integrating the methodology and content of our worldview with our understanding of the language of the Bible. See Jordan's fascinating development of Biblical symbolism in *Through New Eyes* (Brentwood, Tennessee: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1988). Detailed studies related to a Biblical worldview are available from James Jordan's ministry: *Biblical Horizons*, P. O. Box 1096, Niceville, Florida, 32588. Another good introduction to this approach is James Jordan's cassette tape series *The Garden of God*, also available from Biblical Horizons. See also: James Jordan, *Judges: God's War Against Humanism*, *The Law of the Covenant* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1984), and *The Sociology of the Church* (Tyler, Texas: Geneva Ministries, 1986).

12. James Jordan, "Symbolism: A Manifesto," *The Geneva Papers*, May 1984, no. 28.

13. Cf. Ps. 8:1,9; 19:1-6; 29; 97:6 Rom. 1:18-20; etc.

world is a general symbol of God, and that man is a special symbol of God — should be readily conceded by anyone who believes that God is the Creator. But this view is the very antithesis of the thinking of sinful men, who assume that things and events either have meaning in themselves or no meaning at all, and that whatever symbolic dimension there may be is added by man.¹⁴

As Jordan points out, symbolism not only precedes man's interpretation of reality, it precedes the very existence of reality. How can that be? Because God's plan to create the world to reveal Himself, that is, God's determination of the symbols of His glory, preceded the actual creation. In the Bible, essence precedes existence. The world is created in terms of God's previously determined meaning or interpretation. Man, rather than imposing a symbolic meaning on brute facts, is called to understand the God-created symbolism. Man's role in history is to discover the God-designed meaning of reality. When man attempts to create the symbolic meaning autonomously, he is denying that God created the world according to His plan to express the meaning that He intended.

The belief that man should not "create" symbols, however, is not to deny that man is a "symbolizer." On the contrary, man was created as a special symbol of God to reveal, among other things, the Creator's symbolizing nature. In this sense, man cannot escape being a "symbol-generating creature." Although man's symbols are secondary, they are the means by which he restructures reality, which itself reflects God's primary symbols. Even as a sinner, man generates symbols. The problem is that he uses them to deny God and escape from the knowledge of God which everywhere confronts him. Nevertheless, the sinner's revolt against his Lord and King reveals his God-determined nature, for the sinner cannot change what he is: a symbol of God. Symbolism is central to his life, even as air, food, and water are inescapable concerns.¹⁵

14. Cf. *The Sociology of the Church* (Tyler, Texas: Geneva Ministries, 1986), p. 283.

15. The above is a radical simplification of Jordan's presentation in "Symbolism: A Manifesto." It may be added that Jordan also believes a concern for symbolism cannot be reduced to rationalism: "The primacy of the symbolic is not the same thing as the Greek notion of the primacy of the intellect, for symbolism often does not operate at the conscious or rational level of the human psyche. Symbolism entails the equal ultimacy of the rational and the non-rational (as Van Til might put it), unlike the intellectualist heresy which tries to shave away the mysterious."

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The true knowledge and proper covenantal use of symbols, therefore, is a vital concern for Christians. But, how can we understand the symbolism of creation, given the sinful tendency of the human mind? Reason and common sense are certainly inadequate to guide us in the right direction. But God has given us in Holy Scripture a standard to enable us to understand both the symbolism of creation and the symbolism of the Bible itself. The Bible's approach to symbolism must be systematically studied in order to understand the teaching of the Bible and the symbolism of the world around us.¹⁶ Systematic study of Biblical symbolism begins with an understanding of the symbolic themes in the creation narrative of the book of Genesis.

Jordan argues that symbolism is vital to our understanding of the Bible as a whole, because symbolism is essential to the entire Biblical worldview. Symbolism is especially important, however, for the exegesis of prophecy, because the basic symbolic themes of the book of Genesis¹⁷ continue all the way through Scripture and find their realization in Biblical eschatology. Though Jordan himself has not written extensively on eschatology, David Chilton's *Paradise Restored* and *Days of Vengeance* apply Jordan's creation symbolism to the doctrine of the millennium.¹⁸

16. Jordan's commentaries on the book of Judges and on the book of the covenant contain many illustrations of the practical, exegetical, and theological value of his understanding of symbolism. His commentary on Judges in particular is very helpful in understanding how symbols are used in historical narrative. It is not necessary to agree with all of Jordan's suggestions to profit from his very interesting approach. See *Judges: God's War Against Humanism*, and *The Law of the Covenant*.

17. Jordan explains that the early chapters of Genesis provide basic symbolic themes that are developed through the rest of the Scriptures. To name just a few, Light and Darkness, the Spirit-Cloud of Glory, the Holy Mountain, the Garden-Sanctuary of the Lord, Trees, Rivers, Paradise, the Serpent, the Seed, the Mother, the Younger Brother, etc. See Jordan's series on Genesis One in the *Geneva Review*, starting from July 1985; his article "Rebellion, Tyranny, and Dominion in the Book of Genesis," *Christianity and Civilization* No. 3 (Tyler, Texas, Geneva Divinity School Press, 1983), pp. 38-80; and also David Chilton's exposition of these themes in *Paradise Restored* (Tyler, Texas: Dominion Press, 1985). Jordan refers frequently to Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).

18. See David Chilton, *Paradise Restored* and *Days of Vengeance* (Fort Worth: Dominion Press, 1987).

Creation Symbolism and Eschatology

Understanding Biblical symbolism in the doctrine of creation leads to a fresh approach to the interpretation of Daniel, Revelation, and other highly figurative passages. David Chilton follows Jordan's general outline of Biblical symbolism by interpreting prophecy according to the basic symbolic themes which arise from the Genesis creation narrative. When dealing with difficult figurative language, knowing the symbolic themes that run throughout the Bible from creation to Revelation, helps us avoid the erratic, let's-decode-the-Bible approach. The book of Revelation is not interpreted by a speculative attempt to find prophetic fulfillments in the latest edition of the local newspaper, but by relating it to the whole of previous Biblical teaching.

In other words, the Bible itself is the "key" to understanding the Bible's use of figurative language — not the cultural and linguistic orientation of the interpreter. As Vern Poythress points out, what may seem to a 20th-century American to be the "literal interpretation" of the text is not necessarily the most Biblical interpretation and may, in fact, be a speculative attempt to conform the teaching of the Bible to our cultural circumstances.¹⁹

As Chilton explains, symbolism gives us sets or patterns of association.²⁰ Reading Biblical symbolism is like reading poetry — words conjure up pictures and associations with other words and ideas — in particular, the themes of creation. Chilton also urges us to read "visually,"²¹ for the basic creation themes of Scripture usually appeal to the world as we see it.

The ambiguity involved in figurative language does not inhibit communication. It is, rather, essential to the depth and breadth of poetic expression. Consider the words of Psalm 23:1, "The LORD is my Shepherd." No expositor can explain the full

19. *Understanding Dispensationalists*, pp. 59-62.

20. *Paradise Restored*, p. 18ff.

21. Ibid., p. 19. On page 21, Chilton suggests the following rules for studying imagery:

1. *Read visually*; try to picture what the Bible is saying.
2. *Read Biblically*; don't speculate or become abstract, but pay close attention to what the Bible itself says about its own symbols.
3. *Read the Story*; try to think about how each element in the Bible contributes to its message of salvation as a whole.

meaning of this passage, because poetic expression is intended to be broader and deeper than literal language. But does the “ambiguity” of the figurative language inhibit communication? Not in the least. We meditate on the meaning of God’s shepherd care in many different situations and enjoy Him in new and unexpected ways.

To illustrate the approach in more detail, consider the questions Chilton says we must ask in order to understand Revelation 12:1ff.²² This passage speaks of a “woman clothed with the sun, standing on the moon and laboring in childbirth while a dragon hovers nearby to devour her child.” Chilton’s interpretive method is in remarkable contrast to what is all too common in churches today.

A radically *speculative* interpreter might turn first to news of the latest genetic experiments, to determine whether a woman’s size and chemical composition might be altered sufficiently for her to be able to wear the sun; he might also check to see if the Loch Ness Monster has surfaced recently. A *Biblical* interpreter, on the other hand, would begin to ask questions: Where in the Bible does this imagery come from? Where does the Bible speak of a woman in labor, and what is its significance in those contexts? Where does the Bible speak of a Dragon? Where does the Bible speak of someone trying to murder an infant? If we are going to understand the message of the Bible, we must acquire the habit of asking questions like this.²³

To see how Chilton approaches a theme running all the way through the Scriptures, study the following extended quotation on the significance of mountains in Biblical symbolism.

Finally, a very important aspect of Eden’s location is that it was on a *mountain* (Eden itself was probably a plateau on a mountaintop). This follows from the fact that the source of water

22. *Paradise Restored*, p. 17.

23. Ibid. Chilton’s humorous description of the extremes of dispensational interpretation may offend some readers, but the embarrassing fact is that premillennialists have used the headlines as a guide for exegesis throughout this century. See Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now!*

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for the world was in Eden: the river simply cascaded down the mountain, parting into four heads as it traveled. Furthermore, when God speaks to the king of Tyre (referring to him as if he were Adam, in terms of man's original calling), He says: "You were in *Eden, the Garden of God.* . . . You were on the *holy mountain of God*" (Ezek. 28:13-14).

That Eden was the original "holy mountain" explains the significance of God's choice of *mountains* as sites for His redemptive acts and revelations. The substitutionary atonement in place of Abraham's seed took place on Mount Moriah (Gn. 22:2). It was also on Mount Moriah that David saw the Angel of the Lord standing, sword in hand, ready to destroy Jerusalem, until David built an alter there and made atonement through sacrifice (1 Chron. 21:15-17). And on Mount Moriah Solomon built the Temple (2 Chron. 3:1). God's gracious revelation of His presence, His covenant, and His law was made on Mount Sinai. Just as Adam and Eve had been barred from the Garden, the people of Israel were forbidden to approach the holy mountain, on pain of death (Ex. 19:12; cf. Gn. 3:24). But Moses (the Mediator of the Old Covenant, Gal. 3:19), the priests, and the 70 elders of the people were allowed to meet God on the Mountain (after making an atoning sacrifice), and there they ate and drank communion before the Lord (Ex. 24:1-11). It was on Mount Carmel that God brought His straying people back to Himself through sacrifice in the days of Elijah, and from whence the ungodly intruders into His Garden were taken and destroyed (1 Kings 18; interestingly, *carmel* is a Hebrew term for *garden-land, plantation, and orchard*). Again on Mount Sinai (also called Horeb) God revealed His saving presence to Elijah, and recommissioned him as His messenger to the nation (1 Kings 19).

In His first major sermon, the Mediator of the New Covenant delivered the law again, from a mountain (Matt. 5:1ff.). His official appointment of His apostles was made on a mountain

(Mark 3:1-13). On a mountain He was transfigured before His disciples in a blinding revelation of His glory (recalling associations with Sinai, Peter calls this the “holy mountain,” in 2 Pet. 1:16-18). On a mountain He gave his final announcement of judgment upon the faithless covenant people (Matt. 24). After the Last Supper, He ascended a mountain with His disciples, and proceeded from there to a Garden where, as the Last Adam, He prevailed over temptation (Matt. 26:30; cf. Matt. 4:8-11, at the beginning of His ministry). Finally, He commanded His disciples to meet Him on a mountain, where He commissioned them to conquer the nations with the Gospel, and promised to send them the Holy Spirit; and from there He ascended in the cloud (Matt. 28:16-20; Acts 1:19; . . .)

I have by no means exhausted the list that might be given of Biblical references to God’s redemptive activities on mountains; but those which have been cited are sufficient to demonstrate the fact that in redemption God is calling us to return to Eden; we have access to the Holy Mountain of God through the shed blood of Christ. We have come to Mount Zion (Heb. 12:22), and may boldly approach the Holy Place (Heb. 10:19), granted by God’s grace to partake again of the Tree of Life (Rev. 2:7). Christ has built His Church as a City on a Hill, to give light to the world (Matt. 5:14), and has promised that the nations will come to that light (Isa. 60:3). The prophets are full of this mountain-imagery, testifying that the world itself will be transformed into Eden: “in the last days, the mountain of the House of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it” (Isa. 2:2; cf. Isa. 2:2-4; 11:9; 25:6-9; 56:3-8; 65:25; Mic. 4:1-4). Thus the day will come when God’s kingdom, His Holy Mountain, will “fill the whole earth” (see Dn. 2:34-35; 44-45), as God’s original dominion mandate is fulfilled by the Last Adam.²⁴

Chapter Two: Interpreting Prophecy

This excerpt illustrates both the immense practical value and the exegetical importance of recognizing basic creation themes in Biblical symbolism. Following such themes as the garden, the harlot,²⁵ the wilderness, the serpent-dragon, the cloud of glory, and the Biblical imagery of trees, minerals, water, and so forth, Chilton interprets the book of Revelation in the context of the whole Scripture by applying the vivid and powerful imagery of the Old Testament.²⁶ The imagery of Revelation flows from the stream of Biblical symbolism beginning in Genesis; it is an organic part of the Biblical story.²⁷

Creation Symbolism and the Coming of Christ

One of the more controversial aspects of the eschatological debate is the Reconstructionist assertion that many (not all) of the New Testament references to the coming of Christ were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.²⁸ This assertion is based on the Old Testament symbolic language of judgment, which is itself grounded in the creation narrative.²⁹ Chilton, for example, points to Old Testament references to the coming of God — thematically reminiscent of His appearance in the Garden — in which no literal physical appearance actually takes place.³⁰ Rather, God

24. *Paradise Restored*, pp. 30-32.

25. The great harlot of Revelation 17-19 is an interesting example. Though often understood as a reference to Rome, Chilton says that if we knew our Bibles well, we would recognize the language as taken largely from other Biblical passages describing Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the harlot city fornicating with the nations in Isaiah 57, and Ezekiel 16 and 23. The harlot in the wilderness picture comes from Jeremiah 2-3 and Hosea 2. John's statement that the blood of the prophets and the saints is to be found in this harlot points to the words of Jesus concerning Jerusalem in Matthew 23:34-37. The city which has a kingdom ruling over all the kingdoms of the earth (Rev. 17:18) refers to Jerusalem as the center of God's kingdom, not to Rome, for John sees history covenantally. God's temple and God's people are central, not political power. *Paradise Restored*, pp. 187-93.

26. Cf. *Days of Vengeance*, p. ix., the comments in the Foreword by Gordon J. Wenham.

27. *Paradise Restored*, p. 15.

28. It goes without saying that this view is not original with Reconstructionist writers; it has been around for a long time. See J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), who refers to many older writers who also hold this position.

29. Cf. Meredith Kline, *Images of the Spirit*.

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“comes” in judgment through historical agents at His disposal. Thus the fall of Babylon to the Medes is described as the Day of the Lord in which the sun, moon, and stars will no longer give light (Is. 13:9-10). In the judgment against Edom, the very host of heaven will “wear away, and the sky will be rolled up like a scroll” (Is. 34:4). At Samaria’s destruction in 722 B. C., the sun again disappears (Amos 8:9). And God says to Egypt, “Behold, the LORD rides on a swift cloud, and will come into Egypt” (Is. 19:1).

That such passages are couched in the language of final judgment is natural and to be expected, since all historical judgments are foretastes of the final revelation of God’s wrath and the fulfillment of the Genesis warning: “You shall surely die!” The following language, for example, if not understood in context, would certainly seem to be either a reference to the Noahic deluge or perhaps eschatological judgment.

Then the earth shook and trembled;
The foundation of the hills also
Quaked and we were shaken,
Because He was angry.
Smoke went up from His nostrils,
And devouring fire from His mouth;
Coals were kindled by it.
He bowed the heavens also,
And came down
With darkness under His feet.
And rode upon a cherub, and flew;
He flew upon the wings of the wind.
He made darkness His secret place;
His canopy around Him was dark waters
And thick clouds of the skies.
From the brightness before Him,
His thick clouds passed with hailstones and coals of fire.
The LORD also thundered in the heavens,
And the Most High uttered His voice,
Hailstones and coals of fire.
He sent out His arrows and scattered the foe,

30. Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, pp. 64-65, *Paradise Restored*, pp. 57ff., 97ff.; cf. also Kline, *Images of the Spirit*, pp. 97-131.

Lightenings in abundance,
And He vanquished them.
Then the channels of waters were seen,
And the foundations of the world were uncovered
At Your rebuke, O LORD,
At the blast of the breath of Your nostrils.

Although David seems to be using eschatological language, we know from the title of Psalm 18 that he is describing the Lord's rescuing him from his enemies. The Lord's intervention on behalf of David, however, is described as a cosmic cataclysm. The Lord *came down from heaven* and delivered David from those who sought to kill him. The passage sounds like the great passages of Scripture dealing with God's judgment of the world by the Flood, God's judgment on the tower of Babel, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, or the judgment of Egypt. It also sounds like references to the coming of Christ at the end of history. The various judgment passages sound similar because of a common symbolic system, and because historical judgments derive their meaning from their relationship to the final judgment to which they point.

The proper interpretation of the New Testament references to Christ's coming must take into account the Old Testament prophetic language of judgment. For example, the prophecies in Matthew 24 follow Jesus' scathing denunciation of Israel's leaders in chapter 23. Matthew 23 includes Jesus' prophetic judgment that "this generation" shall persecute prophets and wise men sent by Christ, and so be held guilty for "all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zechariah, son of Barachiah" (Mt. 23:35). That one generation should be held accountable for the crimes against God's righteous prophets of all generations suggests unparalleled judgment.

Dispensationalists insist that the language in Matthew 24 must be eschatological, even though the New Testament uses the same figures of speech employed in the Old Testament to describe God's covenantal wrath. Matthew 24 speaks of a coming judgment on Jerusalem, and therefore Israel. This passage contains expressions which in any interpretation must be regarded as figurative — unless we believe that stars can "fall," etc. In fact, in some places in Matthew 24 the text virtually quotes figurative

language word for word from the Old Testament. Dispensationalists, however, assert dogmatically that we must “literally” interpret this language. But they are not always consistent. In Matthew 24:34, for example, Jesus states the time of that judgment very clearly: “Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled” (Mt. 24:34). Here they insist that “generation” should be given the figurative meaning “race” — a meaning no where else supported in Scripture. Isn’t it more “literal” to interpret the passage to mean the generation of Jews alive at the time Christ was speaking? This certainly appears to be a more Biblically justifiable approach.

Essentially, Jordan and Chilton, in line with the preterist interpreters of the past, call for a re-thinking of the New Testament references to the coming of Christ. Given the covenantal connection between historical and eschatological sanctions, the sense of the language of judgment naturally is the same, even when the specific referent — the flood, the exodus, the destruction of Jerusalem, etc. — varies. Whether a particular passage refers to His final coming or to the imminent judgment on Israel must be determined by the context. The essential point postmillennialists insist upon is that the Bible itself must be our standard for interpreting prophetic Scripture.

Conclusion

It should be clear that, beginning with the creation narrative, there is a Biblical basis in the prophetic and symbolic language of the Old Testament for the postmillennial approach to the book of Revelation and other highly figurative New Testament passages. Undoubtedly, the last word has not been spoken on these passages. But an approach to these portions of the Bible based on the Bible’s own creationist imagery is the only method of faithfully interpreting these highly symbolic passages of Scripture.

The so-called “literal” approach of the dispensationalist is far less truly literal than an approach which carefully examines the use of figurative language in the Bible. Dispensational premillennialism, since it either denies or ignores the fact that there is a symbolic system grounded in the Biblical doctrine of creation, is forced to interpret Biblical figures of speech in speculative terms which conform to our cultural

predilections — and/or the evening news — but which are alien to the Bible. The appearance of “literal interpretation” gained by this speculative approach is a false impression — hermeneutical trick-photography.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the “literal interpretation” debate distorts the issue. The issue is not *literal* versus *figurative* interpretation. The fundamental issue in hermeneutics is *whether or not the Bible itself contains the key to prophetic interpretation*. The postmillennialist is confident that the Bible is self-interpreting, since the self-interpreting nature of Scripture is essential to the idea of its transcendent authority. Confusion about the self-interpreting nature of Biblical revelation leads to distortions of the doctrine of inspiration. Ironically, the dispensational doctrine of literal interpretation tends to undermine the authority of the Bible by asserting a form of perspicuity which is culturally relative. Though they claim to interpret “literally,” dispensationalists, too, must distinguish between literal language and figurative language. But the dispensationalist’s criteria for making that distinction are found in the modern Western cultural milieu, rather than in the Scriptures themselves. What the modern American mind can see as “literal” is interpreted “literally” and what it sees as figurative is regarded as figurative.

The Reformed doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture is linked to the idea of Scripture as self-interpreting, so that the Word of God is able to speak to all men in all lands in every generation. The most important single hermeneutical principle is that the Scripture interprets the Scripture.³¹ The Bible itself gives us a system of figurative language and thus provides the key to its own understanding. The real hermeneutical issue, then, is not literal vs. non-literal, but Biblical vs. non-Biblical.

31. This is not to say that general revelation is unnecessary or less necessary than special revelation. General revelation is necessary, sufficient, authoritative, and perspicuous for the purposes for which it was given. Nor do I intend to imply that we do not need general revelation to understand the Bible. We may derive very important information from history, science, or other realms of knowledge to help us understand the Bible. What I am saying is that we do not derive principles of interpretation or our basic approach to the Scriptures from changing cultural norms. On special and general revelation, see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), pp. 62 ff.

Chapter Three

THE CONFLICT OF HISTORY

From the time of man's fall in the Garden of Eden, the history of man has been the history of conflict: "Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace have they not known" (Rom. 3:15-17). But the primary conflict does not concern nations and tribes. The real battle is between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gn. 3:15). This is the fundamental, underlying war.

Most Christians understand this was true in the Old Covenant era before the incarnation. Repeatedly, we see Satanic foes trying to destroy the seed of Abraham to prevent the birth of the Messiah. Abimelek in Genesis, Pharaoh in Exodus, Haman in the book of Esther, and King Herod in the Gospels are only a few examples of demonically inspired leaders who sought to destroy the seed, to prevent the salvation of the world (cf. Rev. 12). But the war did not end with the birth of Christ. It continues on in history.

This historical conflict is at the heart of the Christian philosophy of history and eschatology. It is also at the heart of the eschatological debate, even though postmillennialists, amillennialists, and premillennialists¹ agree on many of the fundamental issues of the philosophy of history.² All believe in the supernatural

1. See David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Fort Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), pp. 493-98, for a discussion of the inadequacy of these terms and the historical development of eschatology.

2. There are five basic questions that the philosophy of history must answer: 1) Who is in

creation of the world, God's sovereign control of history for His own glory, the sin of man and the redeeming work of Christ the incarnate Son, and the future resurrection of the body unto life everlasting.³ Concerning the final victory of God, all positions are equally optimistic and confident. There is no disagreement about who wins in the very end, when history comes to a close. The people of God are taken to heaven and the devil and all wicked men are cast into hell forever (Mt. 25:34, 41, 46). God is victorious over all who rebel against His sovereign authority.⁴

There is significant disagreement, however, when we consider the conflict between Christ and Satan within history itself. The debate centers around two issues in the historical conflict.

ultimate control over history? 2) Who are His representatives in history? 3) What are the laws by which He rules the world? 4) What sanctions does He administer in history to those who keep or disobey His laws? 5) To what end is He leading history? These five questions follow the five-point covenant outline developed by Ray Sutton, *That You May Prosper* (Fort Worth, Texas: Dominion Press, 1987). They can be stated in different words and from slightly different perspectives, but the basic issues are the same.

3. This is a rough summary of the Apostles Creed which, as a statement of faith in the Triune God, is also a statement of faith about history. It points to the radically historical character of Christian religion, in contrast to other religions of the world whose confessions are statements of ideas, not history. See R. J. Rushdoony, *The Foundations of Social Order: Studies in the Creeds and Councils of the Early Church* (Fairfax, Virginia: Thoburn Press, [1969] 1978), pp. 4-5.

4. It must be pointed out, regrettably, that evangelicals in America do not all agree on one of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, the doctrine of hell. In May, 1989, 385 evangelical theologians, Christian leaders, and laymen met at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School to clearly define the word "evangelical." Organized by Carl F. H. Henry and Kenneth Kantzer, the conference represented mainstream evangelical thinking. When a debate broke out on the conference floor over the doctrine of "annihilationism" (the doctrine that non-Christians will not be sent to hell but wiped out of existence), evangelical theologian J. I. Packer pressed the assembly to adopt a statement affirming the eternal punishment of unbelievers. The vote was split, according to the chairman, in favor of those denying the doctrine of hell. No statement was adopted. See Gary North, *Political Polytheism* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), p. 633, note 16.

J. I. Packer did get a second chance, however, when Zondervan published *Evangelical Affirmations*, a collection of articles based upon the conference. Packer's article explicitly refutes universalism and annihilationism, and names the leading evangelicals denying the doctrine of hell: John Stott, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, and John W. Wenham. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Evangelical Affirmations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Academie Books, 1990), pp. 124, 135.

1. What is the nature of the historical conflict?
2. Who is the victor in the New Covenant historical era?

These questions concern the New Covenant era from the death of Christ until His return. With regard to this age, the three schools of eschatology fit into two groups. Premillennialism and amillennialism are pessimistic about the historical conflict between Christ and Satan.⁵ Proponents of these positions often object to being called “pessimistic,” but the fact is both positions assert the victory of Satan through violence and deception, until the time that Christ returns. When Christ does return, He defeats Satan by raw power.

Postmillennialism, on the other hand, is optimistic, but this is no Pollyanna-style optimism. Postmillennial optimism is grounded in the Gospel. The historical conflict is seen as primarily ethical and covenantal, with Christ victorious through the spread of the Gospel. His second coming brings final judgment after the Gospel has already achieved the fullness of victory.⁶

Pessimillennialism: Jesus Loses in History

Premillennialism and amillennialism essentially agree on the historical conflict of the present age. Neither amillennialists nor premillennialists care to admit this, but it can be demonstrated without much difficulty. When we consider how each position answers the two questions of the historical conflict, it is clear that both are

5. Vern S. Poythress’ discussion of the optimism and pessimism of the various millennial positions is helpful to a degree, in so far as it reminds us that all Christians are optimistic in the final sense. But Poythress has missed the central issue of the optimistic-pessimistic debate, at least from the postmillennial perspective. All Christians agree the church is now at war with the world and the devil. The issue is: Who wins this great historical conflict? See Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 48-50.

6. R. J. Rushdoony’s *The Biblical Philosophy of History* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), David Chilton’s *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion*, (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1985), and Gary North’s *Dominion and Common Grace* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987) are three basic Reconstructionist books dealing extensively with the philosophy of history, though the subject appears frequently in other works as well.

fundamentally pessimistic about the present age. In fact, both believe in Satan's victory in the New Covenant era — between the cross and the second coming of Christ.

Amillennial Pessimism

Consider the amillennial scenario. Jesus' disciples go into all the world and preach the Gospel, as He commanded. Here and there people are converted to Christ. Sometimes whole nations are converted. In the long run, however, the number of Christians begins to decrease. When the pagan world gradually comes to understand the full implications of the Gospel, "the crack of doom" comes and Christians are persecuted fiercely. The Church is overwhelmed by the wrath of Satanic humanity until Jesus returns to save the saints and judge the world. Cornelius Van Til describes how the non-Christian progresses in history according to the amillennial view:

But when all the reprobate are epistemologically self-conscious, the crack of doom has come. The fully self-conscious reprobate will do all he can in every dimension to destroy the people of God. So while we seek with all our power to hasten the process of differentiation in every dimension we are yet thankful, on the other hand, for the "day of grace," the day of undeveloped differentiation. Such tolerance as we receive on the part of the world is due to this fact that we live in the earlier, rather than the later, stage of history. And such influence on the public situation as we can effect, whether in society or in state, presupposes this undifferentiated stage of development.⁷

Meredith Kline, an amillennialist, describes the present era in these words: "And meanwhile it [the common grace order] must run its course within the uncertainties of the mutually conditioning principles of common grace and common curse,

7. *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1974), p. 85, quoted in North, *Dominion and Common Grace*, pp. 85-86.

prosperity and adversity being experienced in a manner largely unpredictable because of the inscrutable sovereignty of the divine will that dispenses them in mysterious ways.⁸ Kline is assuring us that there is no certain success for anyone in the present age. The blessings and the curses of this life are distributed in a random manner in the New Covenant era, so that we cannot predict the course of history except in the broadest terms.

Kline is not being candid, however. Given the amillennialist view of history, it is certain that the Church is going to lose in the end. This means that God's rule in the present age must be exercised in favor of unbelievers for their victory to be certain.⁹ Comparing the covenantal systems of the old Adam (era from Adam till Christ) and the New Adam (era from the resurrection to the end of the world) in amillennial theology, we discover that the principle of blessing and cursing is reversed. In the old era, covenant-breakers were cursed and covenant-keepers were blessed. The new era may be ambiguous, but the tendency is just the opposite. In the final analysis, Kline's view means covenant-breakers in this age may rebel against God, confident of their ultimate victory.

The nature of the historical conflict is clear in the amillennial view. Non-Christians dominate the present age according to the principles of oppression that Jesus referred to in Mark 10:42: "Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones are tyrants over them." Power, the religion of ancient Rome, is the religion that will determine human authority in the present age. The amillennial faith says that the only way Satanic power-religion can be effectively removed is by greater power: the second coming of Christ at the end of history.

Until Jesus returns, therefore, history is the devil's playground.¹⁰ Of course, many people will be saved. Amillennialists may even admit that the advance of science and medicine, along with many other cultural blessings, is the result of God's

8. "Comments on an Old-New Error," *Westminster Theological Journal*, XLI (Fall 1978), p. 184, quoted in Gary North, *Millennialism and Social Theory* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), p. 43.

9. See the extended discussion of this problem in Gary North, *Millennialism and Social Theory*, pp. 155-209.

10. Cf. North, *Dominion and Common Grace*, pp. 85-86, 125-26.

grace.¹¹ History will serve the general purpose of glorifying God, but history itself appears to have no special goal other than providing a sphere for the operation of special grace. Once the elect have been saved, history can be trashed and God can start all over.

The meaning is clear. When Satan tempted man in the Garden, he ruined God's original purpose for man: be fruitful, fill the earth, and rule it as God's servant so that God could be glorified by the maturation of His creation (Gn. 1:26). If Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve destroyed this plan, so that man will never fulfill the dominion mandate given in Genesis 1:26-31, then Satan is the victor in history. The church is told to fight against Satan and wicked men, but she is guaranteed that she can never win the battle. Her historical theme song is, "We shall not overcome!"

Thus, premillennialist A. J. McClain compares the amillennial view of history to a staircase leading nowhere, or a loaded gun, which, when fired, can only discharge a blank cartridge.¹² McClain rightly emphasizes that in the amillennial view our only hope is *beyond* history. History itself is like a cramped narrow corridor leading nowhere within the historical process and is "only fit to be abandoned at last for an ideal existence on another plane."¹³ For all practical purposes, then, history belongs to the devil. This, in no uncertain terms, is radically pessimistic.

Optimistic Amillennialism?

Are there some amillennialists who are more optimistic about history? Perhaps. Anthony Hoekema may be an example.¹⁴ It cannot be denied that he makes a valiant

11. Meredith Kline apparently denies that there is a relationship between faithfulness to God's word and historical blessing, but his view is probably not typical. For Kline's view, see *Dominion and Common Grace*, p. 138. For a more optimistic amillennial view, see Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and The Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp.73-5. Even in the case of Hoekema, however, the motive to labor for the glory of God in the broader cultural sphere is weak at best.

12. *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1959] 1968), p. 531.

13. Ibid. p. 529.

14. There are some who apparently call themselves "optimistic amillennialists" who view the course of history rather like postmillennialists; cf. Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, p. 498. But the "optimistic amillennial" position has not been defined in a systematic treatment or defended by Biblical exegesis. There are no volumes of "optimistic amillennial" eschatology to refer to. In the end, such an

attempt to rescue amillennialism from dispensationalist Alva McClain's charge of historical irrelevance. Hoekema asserts that the Christian understanding of history is "basically optimistic," and he argues that the cultural achievements of the present age are in some sense continuous with the eternal kingdom of God.¹⁵ He is exactly on target when he contrasts the Biblical view of history to the Greek cyclical view: "For the writers of the Bible, history is not a meaningless series of recurring cycles but a vehicle whereby God realizes his purposes with man and the cosmos. The idea that history is moving toward divinely established goals, and that the future is to be seen as the fulfillment of promises made in the past, is the unique contribution of the prophets of Israel."¹⁶

Hoekema also asserts that nations as well as individuals are blessed or cursed in terms of God's laws, though he doesn't use specifically covenantal language.¹⁷ He sounds like a postmillennialist when he says, "Christ has indeed brought in the new age, the age of the kingdom of God. The world is therefore not the same since Christ came; an electrifying change has taken place. Unless one recognizes and acknowledges this change, he has not really understood the meaning of history."¹⁸ He sounds even more like a postmillennialist when he affirms that redemption is cosmic.¹⁹

Perhaps Hoekema's popularity as the representative amillennialist stems from the fact that he has flavored his amillennial salad with postmillennial dressing. He returns to a more amillennial tone, however, when he speaks of the "ambiguity" of history, and the parallel growth of good and evil. Concerning the latter, Hoekema says, "History does not reveal a simple triumph of good over evil, nor a total victory of evil over good."²⁰ To the question, "Can we say that history reveals any genuine

approach must reduce either to amillennialism or postmillennialism. See Gary North, *Millennialism and Social Theory*.

15. His entire chapter, "The Meaning of History," presents the amillennial philosophy of history.

The Bible and the Future, pp. 23-40.

16. Ibid., p. 25.

17. Ibid., pp. 26-28.

18. Ibid., p. 31.

19. Ibid., pp. 31-33.

20. Ibid., p. 35. He goes on to say that Christ has won the victory and that Satan is fighting a losing battle, but for Hoekema the victory comes after history, not within it.

progress?" he can only answer, "Again we are faced with the problem of the ambiguity of history."²¹ Though he affirms progress and victory, these can only be perceived by faith. The change brought about by the new age is "electrifying," but history is well insulated. Nothing is openly revealed until after history is over at the judgment.

Not only does Hoekema undermine his optimistic assertions by his principle of ambiguity, he also believes Christ may return at almost any time.²² The final Antichrist could appear "in a very short time"²³ and fulfill the prophecies concerning the last days before Christ's coming. According to Hoekema, we should be ready for the coming of Christ at all times, though we can never know whether it will be soon or far off.

This view has great implications for the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant in Christ. Suppose, for instance, that Christ were to return next week. Will the Abrahamic and Davidic covenant promises of universal dominion have been fulfilled in history?²⁴ Will the world have been converted to Christ so that "all nations will be blessed" in Him? Will the created world have been developed to its full potential and offered to God in praise and thanks? Where is cosmic redemption? And what about all the promises of the past that await future fulfillment? Questions such as these point out the weaknesses in the most optimistic amillennial view of history.

Any view of eschatology which asserts that the Lordship of Jesus in history may never be manifest, except over a relatively small portion of the earth, is less than truly optimistic. Such a view makes meaningless the prayer, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." Yet this is exactly the position of Hoekema. His view of history tolerates the damnation of the vast majority of the human race, in spite of the Abrahamic promise that "all families shall be blessed in you." It is not enough to say that there is continuity between our present cultural work and the final kingdom. The Creation Mandate demands a full development of God's world. It is something far less than the reversal of Satan's rebellion, if history should end with

21. Ibid., p. 35.

22. "Instead of saying that the Perousia is imminent, therefore, let us say that it is impending. It is certain to come, but we do not know exactly when it will come. We must therefore live in constant expectation of and readiness for the Lord's return." Ibid., p. 136.

23. Ibid., p. 162.

24. See my next chapter, "Chapter Four: God's Covenantal Kingdom."

large portions of the creation underdeveloped, not manifesting the praise of God.

To put it bluntly, Hoekema's view tolerates the possibility of 1) a severely limited dominion for Christ, 2) very few men being saved, and 3) a truncated conclusion to the development of world culture. This is certainly not optimism. It may not be simple defeatism either, because Hoekema allows the possibility that the kingdom will see far greater historical realization than history has yet witnessed. But merely allowing the possibility does not do justice to the Biblical promise, nor does it give God's people the encouragement they need to pray with confidence and fight for the kingdom. It is, at best, a timid view that will seldom give birth to bold warriors.

Though Hoekema deals more seriously with history than Kline, all he finally provides, to borrow McClain's analogy, is a longer staircase which appears to be going somewhere. We can not see the end because of the heavy fog of historical ambiguity, but as we climb toward the top we can comfort ourselves with the thought that the staircase may end any moment.

Premillennial Pessimism

The problem with McClain's analysis is that, to the degree the considerations he introduces are vital to a philosophy of history, they refute his own premillennialism as well as amillennialism. For premillennialism also abandons history and finds hope only in a post-historical salvation.²⁵ This may seem to be unfair to the premillennialist, since he does view the millennial kingdom as part of history. However, his view of both the inauguration and the character of the kingdom makes it clear that he is not talking about what is normally called history or "historical process."²⁶

25. Greg Bahnsen, "The Prima Facie Acceptability of Postmillennialism" in *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Winter 1976-77, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 67-68.

26. This is not to mention the fact that premillennialists like Dave Hunt take a rather pessimistic view of the millennium itself. He is quoted as saying, "The millennial reign of Christ upon earth, rather than being the kingdom of God, will in fact be the final proof of the incorrigible nature of the human heart." Also, "In fact, dominion — taking dominion and setting up the kingdom of Christ — is an impossibility, even for God." See Gary DeMar and Peter Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity: Dave Hunt's Theology of Cultural Surrender* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1988), p. 157.

With regard to the present era, there is no significant difference between the premillennial and amillennial schemes. The scenario traced above fits the premillennialist equally well. Again, this means that in the present era, covenant breakers are blessed. Evil men rule by raw power while a small number of elect are saved from sin. Then Christ conquers the nations by a sword that appears to be wielded in His hand, not the sword of the Word proceeding from His mouth (Rev. 19). The return of Christ is like the coming of a cosmic Rambo, with naked force the final solution to the world's problems.

According to premillennialism, however, the return of Christ is followed by a thousand-year earthly kingdom. What is the nature of this kingdom? The same raw power that subdued the final, historical rebellion of mankind continues to threaten men for a thousand years, like the sword of Damocles hanging over them to keep them in line.²⁷ Although the kingdom is said to be spiritual and based upon the conversion of the nations,²⁸ premillennialists also describe the kingdom as an age of totalitarian power miraculously wielded by Christ to restrain the wicked. The daily process of government is carried on by a holy bureaucracy.²⁹

In sum, during this present age of grace, premillennialists say, we work and labor only to lose it all to the Antichrist and his legions during the tribulation. Satan is victorious in the present era, but our hope is that in another age of miraculous raw force, we will reign with Christ.³⁰ Amillennialism ends everything in the here-and-

27. "These great moral principles of the mediatorial government will be enforced by *sanctions of supernatural power*. . . . For in the coming Kingdom the judgments of God will be immediate and tangible to all men (Zech. 14:17-19; Isa. 66:24)." (emphasis in the original). McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, pp. 208-09.

28. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, pp. 218-21.

29. McClain, for example, asserts: "Instead of regarding government as a necessary evil—the less of it, the better — the beneficent rule of this Kingdom will extend to every department of human life and affect in some way every detail." He also suggests that saints in resurrected bodies will rule on earth with Christ. This should provide enough bureaucrats for a beneficent totalitarianism to rule by "the more of it, the merrier" principle. *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, pp. 213-14, 210. Cf. also John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), pp. 301-2; Herman A. Hoyt, *The End Times* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), pp. 180-81.

30. Note: This is not intended to disparage miracles or the miraculous, but rather the use of miracles as a mere raw power option for the defeat of Christ's enemies. The power of the Gospel is also

now — the “blank cartridge” view of history. The premillennial gun, however, fires live rounds: the “magnum force” kingdom. Whereas the Gospel failed in this age, violence and power succeed in bringing in the kingdom. It is a holy violence to be sure, but still something very different from conversion by faith and Spirit-led obedience.³¹

Biblical Optimism: Satan Defeated, the World Converted

Postmillennialism holds that both amillennialism and premillennialism are guilty of virtually surrendering history to Satan, as if, by his temptation of Adam and Eve in the garden, Satan had defeated God’s original purpose to manifest His glory in time and on earth through the rule of His image-bearer, man.³² Postmillennialists do not believe that God simply quits the historical battle with Satan, bringing time to an abrupt end. Nor do they believe that God defeats Satan in history by naked force. Postmillennialists believe that Satan’s plan to spoil God’s image by lies is defeated by the truth of the cross and resurrection. *Satan’s lies must be defeated by God’s words of truth, and not sheer brute power, or else the message of history is nothing more than a demonstration that God is bigger and stronger than Satan.*

Postmillennial hope is an aspect of Biblical soteriology. In the Bible, soteriology and eschatology are one. Furthermore, the historical conflict between Christ and Satan is at the very heart of Biblical soteriology. Christians sometimes forget that the first promise of salvation in the Bible was a promise that Christ would defeat Satan (Gn. 3:15). That promise said nothing specifically of salvation by faith or of a future miracle-working, but it is not brute force. In the postmillennial scheme, Christ’s triumph over Satan is accomplished by His work on the cross and by the omnipotent word of the Gospel, which will not return unto God void but will attain its purpose.

31. Of course, most premillennialists believe in the conversion of the world during the millennium. But why does the conversion of the world wait for the second coming of Christ? What is the meaning of the Holy Spirit and the Gospel in this age? Why does Satan have to be violently overthrown first, before the Gospel can succeed?

32. On the Cultural Mandate, see the discussion in Gary North, *The Dominion Covenant: Genesis* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, revised 1987), pp. 27-36, 133f, 147-49, etc.

resurrection, yet the defeat of Satan meant the reversal of Satan's program and the undoing of all the damage he had done. The rest of the promises in the Bible fill out the meaning of the promise that Satan would be defeated. We must view the defeat of Satan and the plan of salvation through the Gospel as one, for that is the perspective of the Bible.

The Defeat of Satan in the New Testament

The New Testament bears abundant witness to the fact that Satan is a defeated foe. The twofold prophecy of Genesis 3:15 that Satan would inflict injury on Christ but Christ would crush Satan's head was fulfilled in Christ's first coming: "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil" (1 Jn. 3:8b). Jesus' entire ministry was a series of battles with Satan, epitomized by our Lord's repeatedly healing the demon-possessed. When accused by the Pharisees of casting out demons by the power of Satan, Jesus answered: ". . . if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you. Or else how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil his house" (Mt. 12:28-29). Here Christ indicates the twofold significance of His miraculous casting out of demons: 1) Satan has been bound; 2) the kingdom of God has come! Salvation and the defeat of Satan are inseparable.

Jesus Himself indicated that the fulfillment of both aspects of Genesis 3:15 are concentrated at a single point in time. Referring to His imminent crucifixion, Jesus said, "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out" (Jn. 12:31; cf. 16:11). The cross is the focus of salvation and of the historical conflict between Christ and Satan. In the same way the defeat of Pharaoh was necessary for the deliverance of Israel, the defeat of Satan was essential to our salvation: "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:14-15). Paul uses the Exodus imagery to describe our salvation by Christ's death as being taken from one kingdom and placed in another:

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“Giving thanks unto the Father . . . who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.” (Col. 1:12a, 13-14).

The Church still fights with Satan, but not as in the Old Covenant era. Salvation has come and the Church has been given victory in Christ. The gift of the Holy Spirit guarantees that we are safe, because “greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world” (1 Jn. 4:4b). John assures us three times that in Christ we overcome the world (1 Jn. 5:4-5) and then promises that Satan cannot even touch us (1 Jn. 5:18). In like manner, Paul encourages the church in Rome: “And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly” (Rom. 16:20a). Alluding to the Genesis promise of salvation, Paul teaches Christians that the victory of the cross is to be worked out in our lives. Now that Christ has defeated Satan, we are to make the victory manifest by spreading the Gospel and obeying God’s word.

It is clear from the passages above that our battle with Satan is not to be fought on Satan’s terms. Though Satan still practices deception and raw violence, Christ gained the definitive victory at the cross. He is defeating Satan progressively by the sword which proceeds from His mouth (Rev. 19:15), even the word of God (cf. Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12). And when all of His enemies have been defeated by the power of the Spirit and the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:24-25), Jesus will return in judgment to finish the destruction of the devil. The analogy with individual salvation is clear: definitive salvation in justification, progressive salvation in sanctification, final salvation at the resurrection. The postmillennial vision of Christ’s warfare with Satan is distinctively evangelical and optimistic.³³

The Salvation of the World

The New Testament speaks clearly and repeatedly of the plan of the Triune God for the salvation of the world. The Bible teaches that the Father has determined to save the world, that Christ died to save the world, and that the Holy Spirit, through the Gospel, will bring the world to saving faith in Christ. The Three Persons of the Trinity are committed to the salvation of the world that They created. The significance

33. For an extended essay on the doctrine of Satan, see Greg Bahnsen, “The Person, Work, and Present Status of Satan” in *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Winter 1974, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 11-43.

of this fact cannot be overemphasized. The salvation of the world by the saving work of the Triune God is essential to a truly Biblical concept of the Gospel of Christ.

1. The Father's Love

The most often quoted verse of Scripture points to God's unfailing love for the world and His purpose to save it: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved" (Jn. 3:16-17). Interpreters struggle with this glorious declaration of God's saving grace. The amillennial, "five-point" Calvinist insists, rightly, that the passage does not say, and cannot be made to say, that God's love did no more than to make salvation possible — the interpretation of both Arminians and so-called "four-point Calvinists." Most evangelicals in America today hold to the mistaken Arminian interpretation and thus are confused in their understanding of Biblical soteriology. God's love did not merely give us the option of "self-help" salvation, nor was God's love for the world an impersonal, indefinite, "do-good" kind of love. He sent His Son for the purpose of saving the world, and His purpose must be accomplished.³⁴

The Arminian position is not entirely wrong, however. Arminians insist that the word "world" in John 3:16 does not mean, and cannot be made to mean, a small number of elect individuals — the amillennial, "five-point" Calvinist interpretation. John could have said "elect" if that is what he meant. Why would John say "world" if he was, in the amillennial Calvinist understanding, referring to such a small portion of humanity?³⁵ The Arminians are right when they insist that the amillennial Calvinist interpretation of "world" in John 3:16 is too restrictive.

The dilemma of whether to take God's love to be effectual, or whether to take "world" to mean "world," can only be solved by saying "Stop! You're both right!" The answer is found in a correct Biblical eschatology. There is no need to water down

34. See the classic work by Archibald Alexander Hodge, *The Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974, reprint).

35. It is bad enough when a fisherman insists on repeatedly telling us about the "one that got away." The amillennialist imagines John to be the kind of fisherman who comes home with a trout the size of a guppy and claims it's a great catch!

either aspect of the teaching anywhere in the New Testament where we encounter the language of effectual salvation and global extent. God will actually save the world, meaning the vast majority of mankind, and even more broadly, the creation under man's dominion as well (cf. Rom. 8:19-22).³⁶

2. The Son's Atonement

The New Testament witness to our Lord's saving work is no less clear. Jesus was the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world (Jn. 1:29). John declares, with emphasis, "And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn. 2:2). Paul wrote of Jesus' redemptive work for the world: "Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time" (1 Tim. 2:6). He also spoke of reconciliation in universal terms: "And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven" (Col. 1:20). And he declared that God's grace "bringeth salvation to all men" (Tit. 2:11).³⁷

Warfield chose the following three sentences from 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 as his text for a sermon entitled "The Gospel of Paul."³⁸

"For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again." (2 Cor. 5:14-15)

"And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to

36. See Benjamin B. Warfield's famous sermon on John 3:16 "God's Immeasurable Love" in, *The Saviour of the World: Sermons Preached in the Chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary* (Cherry Hill, N.J.: Mack Publishing Co., reprint, 1972), pp. 69-87.

37. The King James and some other translations relate the words "all men" with the verb "hath appeared," but it is better to understand the connection as I have translated above, which agrees also with the New American Standard Bible. See, J. E. Huther, *Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1881), p. 357.

38. *The Saviour of the World*, pp. 89-107.

wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation."

(2 Cor. 5:18-19)

"For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." (2 Cor. 5:21)

Warfield refers to these verses as "not only an announcement of the essence of Paul's Gospel, perhaps the most clear and formal announcement of its essence to be found in his Epistles, but also this announcement in the form which he habitually gave it."³⁹ He states, "You cannot exaggerate, therefore, the significance to his Gospel of Paul's universalism. In important respects this universalism was his Gospel."⁴⁰ By universalism, Warfield does not mean the salvation of each and every individual man, an idea which he emphatically denies Paul ever entertained.⁴¹ Neither can we understand Paul to be teaching "an inoperative universalism of redemption which does not actually save."⁴² What, then, is the significance of Paul's universalism? "He is proclaiming the world-wide reach, the world-wide destiny of God's salvation."⁴³ "'The world for Christ' — not one nation, not one class, not one race or condition of men, but the world and nothing less than the world for Christ!"⁴⁴ The salvation of the world by the Gospel of Christ — the postmillennial vision of a converted world — is an essential aspect of the Good News of God's saving grace: Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world!

Nor is this the Gospel as preached only by Paul. Explaining 1 John 2:2, Warfield argues:

. . . Jesus Christ is very expressly the Saviour of the whole world:
he had come into the world to save not individuals merely, out of

39. *The Saviour of the World*, p. 91.

40. Ibid., p. 93.

41. Ibid., pp. 93-4

42. Ibid., p. 94.

43. Ibid., p. 95.

44. Ibid., p. 94.

the world, but the world itself. It belongs therefore distinctly to his mission that he should take away the sin of the world. It is this great conception which John is reflecting in the phrase, "he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but for the whole world." This must not be diluted into the notion that he came to offer salvation to the world, or to do his part toward the salvation of the world, or to lay such a basis for salvation that it is the world's fault if it is not saved. John's thinking does not run on such lines; and what he actually says is something very different, namely that Jesus Christ is a propitiation for the world, that he has expiated the whole world's sins. He came into the world because of love of the world, in order that he might save the world, and he actually saves the world. Where expositors have gone astray is in not perceiving that this salvation of the world was not conceived by John — any more than the salvation of the individual — as accomplishing itself all at once. Jesus came to save the world, and the world will through him be saved; at the end of the day he will have a saved world to present to his father.⁴⁵

3. The Spirit's Power

The salvation planned by the Father and accomplished by the Son is applied by the Spirit. It is only by the gracious work of the Spirit of God in our hearts that we are able to understand the word of God and exercise faith in Jesus Christ. It is only by His work that we are able to persevere in faith unto the end. And it is only by His work in our hearts that we are able to influence others for the Gospel.

Knowing that the Father loved the world and sent Christ to save it, knowing that Christ was the propitiation for the sins of the world, we should not be surprised when we read that the work of the Spirit is also declared to be global: "And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (Jn. 16:8). The Great Commission, which commands the Church to disciple all the nations of the

45. John E. Meeter, ed., *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 2 vols. (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, [1915] 1970), I:176.

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earth, can, then, only be fulfilled by the power of the Holy Spirit, Who was sent to us for that very purpose (Acts 1:8).

Summary

In spite of the opposition of Satan and the struggle against indwelling sin, man in Christ will *by the grace of God and the power of His Holy Spirit*, without continuous miraculous intervention, fulfill God's original purpose for him by loving obedience to God's commandments. God defeats Satan in history by the death and resurrection of Christ. Applying to their lives the principle of the cross (Mk. 10:42-45; Jn. 12:24-26) and imitating Christ's obedience to the Father, redeemed men prove that true historical power is found in righteousness (cf. Jn. 15:1-16), not in brute force. Satan's promise that man can succeed in building a kingdom without God or His law is demonstrated in history to be a lie. Obedience to Christ — which Satan claimed would limit man and prevent him from realizing his full potential — proves *in time and eternity* to be the true source of both individual and social vitality, joy, strength, and creativity.

The original purpose of the sovereign God to rule the world through His special image, man, is fulfilled by the rule of Christ, the last Adam, through His people (cf. Eph. 1:18-23). Man, ruined by the fall, is also the instrument for God's historical defeat of Satan. For God's purpose in creation cannot be undone. God loves the world. By no means does He commit it to Satan for the duration of time.

Conclusion

The idea that Jesus is the loser in the historical conflict seems so un-Christian it may startle the reader that anyone could hold to such a position. However, both premillennialism and amillennialism maintain, though in slightly different ways, that Satan wins the historical conflict in the present age. In the end, both positions interpret the nature of the battle as a contest of brute strength, won by Satan in history.

Postmillennialism teaches that Christ is the victor in history and that the nature of the historical battle is covenantal and ethical. It is by the Gospel that Jesus defeats His enemies. Christ has commissioned His Church to work with Him here and now

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to accomplish His mission, which is one of Her greatest privileges. He loves the world and He will save the world (Jn. 3:16-17). The Church's preaching of the Gospel is the means through which Christ defeats the evil one and brings the love of God to the world (Mt. 28:18-20; 1 Cor. 15:25).

The message of history is not a story of God defeating evil by brute force, nor is it a story of God's trashing history altogether and finding the answer in eternity. The story of history is the story of God's love marching slowly but relentlessly onward to fulfill His own purpose in creation, defeating His enemy by the apparently weak and foolish message of the cross of Jesus. This is the Biblical story of the world.

The historical question can be summed up, then, in the words of Gary North:

Postmillennialism is an inescapable concept. It is never a question of cultural triumph vs. no cultural triumph prior to Jesus' Second Coming; it is a question of which kingdom's cultural triumph. The amillennialist [and the premillennialist, too, R.S.] has identified the victorious kingdom in history: Satan's.⁴⁶

The Bible identifies the victorious kingdom as God's:

"I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. [note: this is the ascension of Christ] And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed." (Dn. 7:13-14)

46. Gary North, *Millennialism and Social Theory*, p. 116.

Chapter Four

GOD'S COVENANTAL KINGDOM

Eschatology is central to the entire Christian worldview. The debate over the millennium cannot be limited to a particular thousand-year period of history. Neither is it merely an argument over when Christ will return nor a dispute over the interpretation of Revelation and a few other Scriptures. Eschatology deals with the “end of all things” in relation to the process which leads up to the consummation of history. Eschatology deals with the final era of earth history as the conclusion to His story.¹

What kind of plan would history reveal if the ending had no relation to the rest of the story? In a good story, everything is related to the end and builds up to the end. The beginning really is the “genesis” of what organically develops from a seed and, through the process of growth, becomes a great tree. In God’s story of the redemption of the world — the greatest story ever told — the end does not just suddenly appear in the sky, unrelated to what has transpired on earth for centuries. It has a definite relation to and is indeed the culmination of history.

The Bible’s story can be briefly summarized. It is the story of God’s covenantal kingdom. In the first chapters of Genesis, we are told of the creation of this kingdom. Then we learn of its ruin by His enemy who leads God’s own human son, Adam, to

1. “Properly to understand biblical eschatology, we must see it as an integral aspect of all of biblical revelation. Eschatology must not be thought of as something which is found only in, say, such Bible books as Daniel and Revelation, but as dominating and permeating the entire message of the Bible.” Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 3.

betray Him. But God has a plan to save His covenantal kingdom. He will redeem it from evil and restore it to Himself. From the time of Adam, the history of the world centers in God's plan to provide salvation for His kingdom. When Christ the Messiah comes, He recovers what was lost by Adam (Lk. 1:31-33). He wins the decisive victory over God's great enemy Satan (Jn. 12:31), binds the strong man, and proceeds to plunder his goods (Mt. 12:28-29). The rest of history is the story of the kingdom's covenantal development until God, by His grace and through His Spirit, accomplishes the purpose for which He originally created man (Gn. 1:26-28).²

The key to understanding the Biblical story of God's kingdom is the idea of the covenant. The plan of God, creation, the fall, redemption, the enthronement of the Messiah, and the progressive manifestation of God's saving power until the final end of history — all the doctrines of the Bible — are covenantal. The most important doctrine in the Bible for an understanding of God's eschatological kingdom is, therefore, the doctrine of the covenant. Ironically, covenant theologians often fail to emphasize this truth,³ while dispensationalists, who consider themselves "non-covenantal" in their theology, base their whole eschatology on a misinterpretation of the covenant.⁴

What Is a Covenant?

Reformed theologians frequently refer to the covenant as if the word needed no definition. Some offer synonyms such as "agreement" or "compact." A covenant is said to be a compact between two or more parties in which promises are made and conditions are agreed upon. When the conditions are fulfilled, the promised benefits

2. See the extended development of the Biblical story in James Jordan's *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt).

3. Neither the amillennial covenant theologian Anthony Hoekema, nor the postmillennial theologian Loraine Boettner makes any significant use of the idea of the covenant in their discussion of Biblical eschatology. See Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, and Boettner, *The Millennium* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957).

4. See, for just one example of many, Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeau Brothers, 1953).

are bestowed.⁵ This definition is not bad, but it doesn't go far enough. The idea of the covenant remains vague. The lack of a clear and fully developed covenantal idea has led to significant disagreements among Reformed theologians concerning the covenant.⁶

There has been a new development in covenant theology, however, that promises to provide a definition of the covenant sufficiently broad to enable theologians to make better use of the covenantal idea. In his book *That You May Prosper*, Ray Sutton restates Meredith Kline's outline of Deuteronomy in terms that open up new avenues for systematic theology, apologetics, and Biblical theology.⁷ According to Gary North, Sutton's book should be regarded as a classic volume that unlocks the Biblical doctrine of the covenant as no other book in the history of the Church ever has.⁸ Some will undoubtedly disagree with North's enthusiastic evaluation of Sutton's book, but if those who disagree attempt to provide a better solution to the problem of defining the covenant, the book will still be very important. What Sutton has done is to make the covenant doctrine clear and concrete, just as the Synod of Dort made the Calvinistic doctrine of salvation clear and concrete.

Sutton's outline of the covenant is derived from Kline's analysis of the book of

5. See R. L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), pp. 429-33, and *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, VII, 1-3.

6. Note, for example, the differences between two of America's foremost covenant theologians John Murray and Meredith Kline. For a discussion of the difference between Murray and Kline, see P. Richard Flinn, "Baptism, Redemptive History, and Eschatology" in James Jordan (ed.), *Christianity and Civilization No. 1: The Failure of American Baptist Culture* (Tyler, Texas: Geneva Divinity School, 1982), pp. 122-131.

7. Gary North in "Publisher's Epilogue," *Paradise Restored*, p. 337. David Chilton has already made effective use of Sutton's model as a tool of Biblical analysis in his commentary on Revelation, *Days of Vengeance*. Gary North and Gary DeMar have demonstrated the remarkable versatility and intellectual power of the covenant model as a theological construct, employing it as an outline for discussing subjects such as the Bible's teaching about government and international relations. See Gary North, *Healer of the Nations: Biblical Principles for International Relations* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), and Gary DeMar, *Ruler of the Nations: Biblical Principles for Government* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987).

8. Gary North in the "Publisher's Preface" to Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987), pp. xi-xix.

Deuteronomy. Kline, following Mendenhall and others in applying the outline of ancient suzerain treaties to the book of Deuteronomy,⁹ analyzed the suzerainty treaty in six parts.¹⁰

Sutton's outline of the book of Deuteronomy is based upon this model, but varies from it primarily in its theological interpretation of the covenant. Sutton has also shortened the six points to five. What Kline and others express in terms of historical and documentary description, Sutton explains in language that shows the relation of the covenant to life. Here are Sutton's five points of the covenant:

True Transcendence (*Deut. 1:1-5*). Kline and others point out that the covenant begins with a "preamble." But what does the Biblical preamble of Deuteronomy teach? Here we find that God declares *His* transcendence. True transcendence does not mean God is distant, but that He is *distinct*.

Hierarchy (*Deut. 1:6-4:49*). The second section of the covenant is called the "historical prologue." Scholars who have devoted attention to suzerainty treaties point out that in this section of Deuteronomy, the author develops a brief history of God's Sovereign relationship to His people around an authority principle. What is it? And, what does it mean? Briefly, God established a *representative* system of government. These representatives were to mediate judgment to the nation. And the nation was to mediate judgement to the world.

Ethics (*Deut. 5-26*). The next section of the covenant is usually the longest. The stipulations are laid out. In Deuteronomy, this section is 22 chapters long (*Deut. 5-26*). The

9. *Ibid.*, p. 14-17. Sutton points out that Deuteronomy is not a copy of the suzerainty treaties. The suzerainty treaties copied the Biblical original.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 15-16. 1. The Preamble; 2. The Historical Prologue; 3. Stipulations; 4. Blessing and Cursing; 5. Successional Arrangements; 6. Depository Arrangements. As Sutton points out, Mendenhall originally listed seven divisions of the covenant. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Ten Commandments are re-stated and developed. These stipulations are the way God's people defeat the enemy. By relating to God in terms of ethical obedience, the enemies fall before His children.

The principle is that law is at the heart of God's covenant. The primary idea being that God wants His people to see an ethical relationship between cause and effect: be faithful and prosper.

Sanctions (*Deut. 27-30*). The fourth part of Deuteronomy lists blessings and curses (*Deut. 27-28*). As in the suzerain treaty, Kline observes that this is the actual process of ratification. A "self-maledictory" oath is taken and the sanctions are ceremonially applied. The principle is that there are rewards and punishments attached to the covenant.

Continuity (*Deut. 31-34*). Continuity determines the true heirs. This continuity is established by ordination and faithfulness. It is historic and processional. The covenant is handed down from generation to generation. Only the one empowered by the Spirit can obey and take dominion. He is the one who *inherits*. The final principle of the covenant tells "who is in the covenant," or "who has continuity with it," and what the basis of this continuity will be.¹¹

Of course, the five-point approach to the covenant is not necessarily the only outline of the covenant that has Biblical validity. James Jordan, in a inductive study of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, suggests that a threefold (Trinity), fourfold (world foundations), fivefold (housebuilding), sixfold (man), sevenfold (sabbath), tenfold (law), or twelvefold (covenant people) organization of the covenant may be possible.¹² Jordan does not believe that the division of the covenant into five parts

11. Ibid., p. 16-17.

12. James B. Jordan, *Covenant Sequence in Leviticus and Deuteronomy* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), p. 3-6. Jordan also suggests a threefold approach to the covenant in *The Law*

has any actual priority over other possible outlines.¹³ But he also shows that a five-point outline is used most frequently by Moses and is not an arbitrary invention of expositors.¹⁴

Also, North,¹⁵ Sutton,¹⁶ and Jordan¹⁷ analyze the Ten Commandments as a twofold repetition of the five-part covenant structure.¹⁸ The five-point covenant

of the Covenant (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1984), p. 7: "In summary, the covenant has three aspects. There is a legal bond. There is a personal relationship. There is a structure within the community." He develops a four-point and a twelve-point approach in *Through New Eyes*, pp. 130-31.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

14. Jordan demonstrates that the first five books of the Bible fit the covenant model Sutton outlined. Genesis, as the book of creation and election, emphasizes the sovereignty of the transcendent God. Exodus is a book of transition from Egypt and its social order to a new social order with new hierarchies, including the house of God as the symbol and center of the new order. Leviticus, the book of the laws of holiness, sets forth the central concern of the law of God for His people: whether in ceremony or in daily life, Israel is to be the holy people of God. Numbers begins with the numbering of Israel as God's army, for they are to carry out His sanctions against the people of Canaan. And when Israel failed in her mission to apply the covenant curse of God to His enemies, they themselves inherited His covenant curse. In Deuteronomy, the next generation, which will inherit the land, is instructed in the law of God in preparation for the conquest. *Covenant Sequence in Leviticus and Deuteronomy*, pp. 9-10. The first five books of the New Testament also follow the covenant outline: Matthew, Christ the King; Mark, Christ the servant of God, submitting to His will; Luke, Christ the perfect man; John, Christ the divine/human judge and giver of eternal life; Acts, Christ building His Church from heaven by pouring out the inheritance of the New Covenant, the Holy Spirit.

15. Gary North, *The Sinai Strategy: Economics and the Ten Commandments* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1986).

16. *That You May Prosper*, pp. 214-24.

17. *Covenant Sequence in Leviticus and Deuteronomy*, pp. 10-13.

18. (1) The first commandment, in teaching that God alone is to be worshipped, calls us to honor the transcendent Creator and Redeemer. In forbidding murder, the sixth commandment protects the image of the transcendent God.

(2) The second and the seventh commandments are related throughout the Bible in the connection between idolatry and adultery. Both sins are perversions of submission to the God-ordained order.

(3) The third section of the covenant, ethics, has to do with boundaries, which is also the point in the eighth commandment: "Thou shalt not steal." The third commandment demands that we wear the name of God righteously — a call to obey His law whereby we show the glory of His name in our lives.

structure is, then, a tool for Biblical exegesis. It is also an outline for relating the Biblical covenant to the realities of everyday living, such as education, the family, etc. Jordan lists the five points in broad terms that make the implications of each point clear:

1. Initiation, announcement, transcendence, life and death, covenantal idolatry.
2. Restructuring, order, hierarchy, liturgical idolatry, protection of the bride.
3. Distribution of a grant, incorporation, property, law in general as maintenance of the grant.
4. Implementation, blessings and curses, witnesses, sabbath judgments.
5. Succession, artistic enhancements, respect for stewards, covetousness.¹⁹

Again, to see clearly the practical implications of the covenant outline, North restates the five points of the covenant in the following five simple questions that are especially relevant to business. With slight variation, however, these questions can be applied to any intellectual discipline or practical issue.

1. Who's in charge here?
2. To whom do I report?
3. What are the rules?
4. What do I get for obeying or disobeying?

(4) The fourth and the ninth commandments are both concerned with sanctions. The Sabbath is a day of judgment in which man brings his works to God for evaluation. The command not to bear false witness puts us in the courtroom, participating in the judicial process.

(5) The fifth and tenth commandments correspond to the fifth part of the covenant, inheritance/continuity. In the fifth commandment, children, as heirs, are told how to obtain an inheritance in the Lord. In the tenth commandment, we are forbidden to covet, a sin that leads to the destruction of the inheritance in more ways than one.

19. *Covenant Sequence in Leviticus and Deuteronomy*, p. 14.

5. Does this outfit have a future?²⁰

How Important Is the Covenant?

The covenant can, without exaggeration, be called the key to understanding Scripture. The Bible itself is a covenantal book recording for us the covenantal dealings of our covenantal God with His covenantal kingdom. Reformed theology teaches that the inter-personal relationships among the Persons of the Trinity are presented in Scripture as covenantal,²¹ though this cannot be proved by simply referring to a proof text.

To understand why, we must remember not to limit our understanding of the covenant only to those passages in Scripture where the word is used. The Bible itself regards promissory agreements as covenantal, even where the word “covenant” does not appear in the original record. For example, when God refers to His covenant with Noah in Genesis 6:18, the implication is that God has already established a covenant relationship with man.²² The covenant with Abraham is clearly established in Genesis 12, though the official covenantal ceremony does not occur until Genesis 15. God promised David an enduring dynasty, but the word covenant does not appear in 2 Samuel 7. Only later, in Psalm 89, is the Davidic promise referred to as a covenant. The conclusion is that where the substance of a covenant appears, a covenant exists.

Although there has been debate among Reformed theologians about the details, there has been general agreement that the work of redemption in history is based upon covenantal arrangements among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.²³ Geerhardus Vos sees in this the genius of the Reformed principle: the Three Persons of the Triune God covenanted among themselves for their own glory to save the world from sin. In Vos' words:

20. *The Sinai Strategy*, p. xv.

21. See Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant*, pp. 4-8.

22. For a detailed discussion of this and other passages, see W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant & Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids and Carlisle, U.K.: Baker Book House and The Paternoster Press, [1984] 1993), especially pp. 11-26.

23. See Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., ed., *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), pp. 245ff.

In the dogma of the counsel of peace, then, the doctrine of the covenant has found its genuinely theological rest point. Only when it becomes plain how it is rooted, not in something that did not come into existence until creation, but in God's being itself, only then has this rest point been reached and only then can the covenant idea be thought of theologically.²⁴

The covenantal outline may be applied to the covenant between the Father and the Son. First, the eternal counsel of God is the most profound example of covenantal transcendence — the three Persons of the Trinity from eternity covenanting to save man from sin. Second, Christ is appointed to be the representative of the Godhead among men to reveal God (Jn. 1:18) and also to be the last Adam, to represent man before God (1 Cor. 15:45, 47; Rom. 5:12ff.). Third, Christ was given an appointed work (Jn. 17:4). Born under the law, He kept the law both for Himself and for those whom He would redeem (Gal. 4:4-5). His death for our sins was the supreme work assigned to Him from eternity (1 Pet. 1:19-20; Rom. 5:18-19). Fourth, God promised Christ a reward for His work — the men whom He redeemed (Is. 42:6-7; 52:15; 53:10; Jn. 17:6, 9, 11-12, etc.). Fifth, the Messiah is predestined to become the "heir of all things" (Heb. 1:2), as the Last Adam who defeated sin and death (1 Cor. 15:21-28), as the true Seed of Abraham (cf. Rom. 4:13; Gal. 3:16), and as the Son of David who inherits the throne of the kingdom (Is. 49:8; Dn. 7:13-14; Heb. 1:2-14).

Because God is a covenantal God, He created the world in covenant with Himself. Creation itself was a covenantal act.²⁵ When God created man, He created him in covenantal relation to Himself and revealed Himself covenantally (Gn. 1:26-28). Adam had to recognize God as His sovereign King. He knew that he was, as God's image, His vice-regent on earth and the representative head of humanity. God required obedience of Adam and specifically tested him at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The promise of blessing and the threat of the curse were revealed to Adam. Had Adam obeyed, he would have inherited the world.

Robert Rollock put it succinctly: "God says nothing to man apart from the

24. Ibid., p. 247.

25. See Dumbrell, *Covenant & Creation*.

covenant.”²⁶ A fundamental principle of Biblical and of Reformed theology is that revelation is always covenantal. God is a covenantal God. His creation of the world was a covenantal act that brought into being a covenantal kingdom, in which man was appointed as God’s covenantal representative. The covenant is the key to understanding the Scripture. It follows that it is also the key to understanding eschatology.

But Reformed theologians have not followed through on this Biblical insight.²⁷ Until Ray Sutton’s *That You May Prosper*, only the dispensationalists had anything approaching a covenantal eschatology.

What is the Essence of the Covenant?

If we are correct in asserting that the covenant begins in God and the personal relations of the Father, Son, and Spirit in all eternity, it must be clear that all “contractual” definitions are fundamentally mistaken.

The same book of Deuteronomy that provided Sutton an outline of the covenant has also been declared “the center of biblical theology” by S. Herrmann. And von Rad designates it “in every respect as the center of the OT Testament.”²⁸ I do not believe these assessments are exaggerated. It is commonly agreed by Biblical scholars that the historical, prophetic, and wisdom literature of the Old Testament all rely heavily on the book of Deuteronomy in particular, and the Mosaic writings in general.

What is equally important is that these scholars agree on character of Deuteronomy as a covenantal document. In the words of William L. Moran of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, “it [Deuteronomy] is the biblical document *par excellence*

26. Quoted in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 239.

27. Even Herman Witsius’ lengthy discussion of the covenants between God and man does not develop eschatology in any distinctly covenantal manner. Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 2 vol. (Escondido, Cal: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, reprint 1990).

28. Both quoted in Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, revised edition, 1975), p. 95. Hasel, by the way, does not agree with von Rad and Herrmann.

of the covenant.”²⁹ Delbert R. Hillers of Johns Hopkins University wrote of Deuteronomy, “Deuteronomy is a Symphony of a Thousand, which brings us covenant ideas of very high antiquity, some of them in a fullness not found elsewhere . . .”³⁰

What is remarkable about the citations from the above scholars is that none of them are Reformed Christians, committed to traditional Reformed covenant theology. They cannot be said to affirm the special place of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament or the covenantal character of Deuteronomy because of a theological prejudice in favor of Reformed theology. It is, however, only in Reformed theology that their insights into Deuteronomy find systematic expression.

Even more significant than these scholars’ assertions about the importance of Deuteronomy as a covenant document is their understanding of Deuteronomy’s message, for in this supremely covenantal book we discover the very heart and essence of the covenant. To quote from Moran again, “It should be remarked first of all that, if Deuteronomy is the biblical document *par excellence* of love, it is also the biblical document *par excellence* of the covenant.”³¹ According to the book of Deuteronomy, the essence of God’s covenant is love.³²

This is what we would expect, for this is true of the covenant between the persons of the Trinity in their eternal covenantal fellowship. The covenant bond of the Father, Son, and Spirit may come to expression in terms that fit the formula of an “agreement,” but the essence of the covenant is love. And because man is God’s image, the essence of God’s covenant relationship with man, too, is love.

The covenant, then, must be defined as a *bond of love* in which the parties of the covenant solemnly swear to devote themselves to seek the blessing of the other party. Among the persons of the Trinity, the covenant is the formal expression of the mutual

29. “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 25, April 13, 1976, p. 82.

30. Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), p. 149.

31. Op. Cit.

32. F. Ch. Fensham’s view is similar: “The continuation of relationship is the heart of the covenant . . .” See “Covenant, Promise, and Expectation in the Bible,” in *Theologische Zeitschrift*, vol. 23, no. 5, 1967, p. 310.

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commitment of love between Father, Son, and Spirit. In God's relationship with man, the covenant is the formal promise of God's love and grace to man. As we have observed before, this kind of relationship in the nature of the case demands reciprocation. Obedience to God's commandments is the covenantal expression of a creature's love to the Creator. Never in the Bible, whether in the books of Moses or in the New Testament, does the covenant imply a contractual sort of legalism.

This understanding of the covenant brings our doctrines of the Trinity, creation, revelation, salvation, and eschatology all into systematic relationship with one another, for all of these doctrines find their common ground in the notion of the covenant. Furthermore, recognizing the covenantal nature of the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity binds systematic theology and Biblical theology. The Trinitarian God of covenantal love becomes the center of our whole theological enterprise, including eschatology.

Covenant and Eschatology

What does it mean to have a covenantal eschatology? It means we must see history as the unfolding of God's covenant promises. Therefore, postmillennialists can agree with the dispensationalists that God's covenant promises to Abraham and David will be literally fulfilled. But the dispensationalists make three fundamental errors in their interpretation of these covenants. One, they do not see the Abrahamic, the Davidic, or the New covenants as an extension of the Creation Mandate.³³ Two,

33. It is not impossible to modify the idea to fit into a dispensational framework, but the older standard dispensational works make no attempt to do so. J. Dwight Pentecost mentions Adam's rule in the garden merely as a stage in the Old Testament theocratic kingdom. *Things to Come*, p. 435. McClain does seem to relate the kingdom of Christ to the Adamic rule, but the idea is not developed. *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, pp. 42-44. Neither Ryrie's *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* nor Walvoord's *The Millennial Kingdom* refers to Genesis 1:26-28. The new "progressive" dispensationalism apparently makes room for the idea, but since dispensational theology is in transition, it is hard to tell who the spokesmen really are. Cf. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, ed., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 307.

One older dispensationalist who seems concerned about emphasizing an eschatological fulfillment of the Genesis 1 mandate is Herman A. Hoyt, who sees it fulfilled in eternity. According to Hoyt,

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they do not, as the New Testament does, see these covenants fulfilled in Christ at His first coming. Three, they do not consider Christ's present reign over the world to be covenantal. Reformed amillennialists, on the other hand, usually do not make the first two mistakes, but they are guilty of the third in so far as they do not discuss the present rule of Christ from a covenantal perspective. The effect, is that for all practical purposes, amillennialists end up close to the dispensationalists even concerning the relationship of the covenants and their fulfillment in the first coming of Christ.

The Creation Mandate and the Covenants

Was the Creation Mandate set aside when Adam sinned? Many Christians seem to think so, but this results in a conception of the Biblical story in which Genesis is not really the beginning. Eschatology becomes separated from God's original purpose for creation. In the Bible, however, the connection between the Creation Mandate and the covenants is explicit.

When God created man, He gave the Creation Mandate as a covenant, indicated by the covenant language, "And God blessed them" (Gn. 1:28). God's blessing was threefold: dominion, land, and a seed. Man was given dominion as God's vice-regent. The Garden of Eden was man's special dwelling and the whole world was his to rule. The blessing also included the command to be fruitful and the implied promise of many children. The threefold blessing was man's calling to finish the construction of God's kingdom on earth. God did the basic building when He created the world in six days. Now man was to imitate God in his own six-day work week and further develop the world by filling it up and ordering it for God's glory (cf. Gn. 1:2ff.). But Adam's sin turned the blessing into a curse and he became a slave to Satan's dominion. The land would rebel against him as he had against God. Not only was the bearing of children affected by the curse (Gn. 3:16), Adam's first son, Cain, embodied the curse.

The existence of the curse, however, did not mean that the Creation Mandate was

believers in Christ who have survived in their Adamic bodies until the end of the millennium are not glorified. They continue to procreate and fill the universe in Adamic bodies, to fulfill the original Creation Mandate. Hoyt rightly understands how problematic Genesis 1:26-28 is for dispensational theology, but, consistent with his futurism, postpones the solution to eternity. *The End Times*, pp. 230-32, 242.

erased from God's plan. Even though the world was cursed because of Adam's sin, and even though God "de-created" the whole world in the Flood, God's covenant with Noah was obviously a continuation of the Creation Mandate.

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered. Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things. (Gn. 9:1-3)

God did not give up on His original purpose in creating the world. What Satan ruined by tempting man to sin, God would reconstruct by redeeming grace. Noah and his sons were given dominion over the land that God gave them — the whole world — with the promise of a seed implied in the command to multiply.

Thus, Genesis not only emphasizes God's blessing Adam and Eve (Gn. 1:28; 5:2), it goes on to show that God blessed Noah and his sons (Gn. 9:1, 26) with the same basic blessing. God's call to Abraham, too, is stated as a blessing (Gn. 12:1-3). The literary connection in the book of Genesis is undeniable.³⁴ The content of the blessing of Abraham points unmistakably to the original creation. God promises Abraham dominion (explicitly stated in Genesis 17:6, 16; 22:17, but also included in the idea of a great name and in being a source of blessing or curse to the nations), a land (which Paul tells us is the whole earth, Romans 4:13), and abundant seed (Gn. 22:17).³⁵ In the

34. Dumbrell develops this extensively, see *Covenant & Creation*, pp. 11-79. Gordon J. Wenham asserts, "Blessing not only connects the patriarchal narratives with each other (cf. 24:1; 26:3; 35:9; 39:5), it also links them with the primeval history (cf. 1:28; 5:2; 9:1). The promises of blessing to the patriarchs are thus a reassertion of God's original intentions for man." *Genesis 1-15*. Word Bible Commentary, (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), p. 275.

35. The threefold blessing as I have stated it here is not something different from the "spiritual" blessing of the covenant often repeated in the formula, "I will be their God and they will be my people." For God "to be our God," or for God to be "with us" is the restoration of Edenic blessing. When He is with us, we have dominion, enjoy His land, and are blessed with children. The fuller statement of covenantal

same manner that the Mosaic covenant, the Davidic covenant, and the New covenant grow organically out of the Abrahamic covenant,³⁶ the Abrahamic covenant itself grew out of the covenant with Noah and the original covenant with Adam and Eve.

From the beginning, redemption in the Bible is covenantal, and covenantal redemption is the restoration of God's original covenantal kingdom.³⁷ This necessarily includes the defeat of Satan, the restoration of mankind to God, and the submission of the created order to man as its rightful lord under God. It also means a global Christian culture in a world filled with redeemed men who rejoice to submit to the Lordship of Christ. Nothing less could fulfill the Biblical meaning of the Creation Mandate. Nor could anything less fulfil the renewal of the Creation Mandate in the covenants of redemption.

The Christ and the Covenants

Dispensationalists insist on the literal fulfillment of the covenants. The problem is that their idea of literal fulfillment may not conform to what the Bible refers to as fulfillment. As a result the dispensationalists posit redundant and theologically meaningless future fulfillments to satisfy their understanding of what the fulfillment should have been. This entire approach leads to a misreading of the New Testament teaching about Jesus' fulfillment of the covenants in His first coming.

The very first words of the New Testament confirm that Jesus Christ is the heir of Abraham and David (Mt. 1:1). Before Jesus' birth the angel promised Mary: "And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end" (Lk. 1:31-33). Mary

blessing in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 expands the basic blessings of the Creation Mandate.

36. This is generally agreed upon by scholars from every perspective, though older dispensationalists would not have included the Mosaic covenant as an organic growth from the Abrahamic.

37. Dumbrell writes: "The kingship of God sought expression through a whole web of relationships which successive covenants both pointed towards and also exercised over the people of God and their world. But this kingship presupposed a return within history to the beginning of history." Ibid., p. 206.

understood that her Son would be the One to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant promise (Lk. 1:55). Zacharias' psalm of praise connects the Davidic promise with the Abrahamic covenant and all the promises of salvation since the world began, and it specifically includes the defeat of Israel's Satanic enemies (Lk. 1:68-75). The Gospels teach that the Messiah came into the world to fulfill the covenant promise of salvation.

The Gospel of Luke ends and the book of Acts begins with further confirmation that Jesus fulfills the promises of the Old Testament (Lk. 24:25-27, 44-47; Act. 1:2-8). In both passages, the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture and the commission to preach the Gospel to the whole world are linked. It is through the preaching of the Gospel that the disciples continue the kingdom work that Jesus had begun, leading to the covenantal growth of the promised kingdom.

1. The Abrahamic Covenant Fulfilled in Christ's Seed

The New Testament teaches in unequivocal language that Jesus fulfilled the Abrahamic covenant. The central passage is Galatians 3 where Paul says:

Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham. . . . That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. . . . Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ. . . . For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to

the promise. (Gal. 3:7-9, 14, 16, 26-29)

It is hard to imagine how Paul could have been more explicit. Believers inherit the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant because they are in Christ, the One to whom the promises were given. This cannot be brushed aside by saying, "the saved in every age, in a sense, are Abraham's seed,"³⁸ or limited to the idea that Christians share only in the spiritual blessings of the Abrahamic covenant.³⁹ Paul is defining the seed that inherits the Abrahamic blessing. He says as clearly as words can convey, that the promises given to the seed were not given to "seeds, as of many; but as of one," namely Christ. He did not limit Jesus' inheritance to the spiritual promises of the covenant, neither did he say that those who are heirs in Christ inherit only a part of the covenant. The promises to Abraham are given in their entirety to Christ and in Christ to those who believe. Paul's words cannot mean anything else.

In fact, Paul's teaching is related to a theme that begins in the Gospel of Matthew: the transfer of the inheritance to the true heir. John the Baptizer warned the Jews not to think that they would inherit the Abrahamic covenant on the basis of merely physical descent, because God "is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham" (Mt. 3:9). When Jesus saw the faith of the centurion, he said, "Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 8:10-12). He later told the Jewish leaders, "Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Mt. 21:43; cf. Lk. 13:27-29; Joh. 8:39-40; Act. 3:23).

It is in the overall context of God's raising up children to Abraham from Gentile stones (ie. taking the kingdom away from Israel and giving it to Gentile believers) that we must understand Jesus' condemnation of Israel. The destruction of the temple finds its meaning in the transfer of the covenantal inheritance from national Israel to a new Israel composed of those who are in the True Seed. Jesus' final words to Israel make it clear that she was rejected of God because of her sins (Mt. 23:25-38). His

38. *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 508.

39. Ryrie, *The Basis of Premillennial Faith*, p. 62, and Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 88.

prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was phrased in language used by the Old Testament prophets to describe covenantal disinheritance (Mt. 24:1-35).⁴⁰ Matthew's entire Gospel, in other words, includes the disinheritance of Israel as one of its major themes. John's Revelation is an expanded version of Jesus' judgment on Israel, using the same Old Testament language of covenantal judgment.⁴¹

But the disinheritance of Israel is not the annulment of the Abrahamic promises. Jesus Himself inherits the promise of a seed in the Church which He Himself redeemed (Is. 53:10), the promise of the land in His inheritance of the whole earth (Mt. 28:18; Heb. 1:2),⁴² and the promise of dominion in His exaltation to God's right hand as David's Son (Acts 2:30ff). Christ's people, both of Jewish and Gentile descent, have become co-heirs of the Abrahamic blessings, so that we rule together with Him (Dn. 7:14, 27; Eph. 2:11-20; 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:5-6; 2:26-27; 3:21). The Church is a new humanity which shall defeat Satan⁴³ and, by the power of the Gospel,⁴⁴ eventually bring about the fulfillment of God's original creation purpose: a global Christian civilization bearing fruit abundantly to the glory of God.

2. The Davidic Covenant Fulfilled in Christ's Ascension

The evidence that Jesus fulfills the Davidic promise is equally straightforward. The first Christian sermon, preached by Peter on the day of Pentecost, was devoted to the truth that Jesus Christ in His resurrection inherited the throne of David:

Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch

40. See the excellent and detailed exegesis of this passage in Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Atlanta: American Vision, Inc., 1994).

41. See David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*.

42. Bruce Walke refers to the New Testament's deafening silence regarding Israel's return to the land of Palestine: "If revised dispensationalism produced one passage in the entire New Testament that clearly presents the resettlement of national Israel in the land, I would join them. But I know of none!" "Land," Walke points out, is the fourth most frequently used word in the Old Testament. See Walke's response in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, p. 357. The important point is that the promise of the land is expanded to include the entire earth.

43. See chapter 3.

44. See chapter 1.

David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day. Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption. This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear. For David is not ascended into the heavens: but he saith himself, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, Until I make thy foes thy footstool. Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ. (Acts 2:29-36)

As with Paul earlier, it is difficult to imagine what other words Peter could have used to express more lucidly the idea that the resurrected Christ now sits on the throne of David, fulfilling the Davidic covenant. McClain's assertion that Peter intends here to distinguish the throne of David from the throne on which Christ now sits is a gross misreading of the text.⁴⁵ Peter tells us clearly that David foresaw the resurrection of Christ and that Christ resurrected in order to sit on David's throne. Now that He is seated on David's throne, Christ pours out the blessing of His Spirit and waits for the destruction of every Satanic enemy. Therefore, Peter says, let every Christian know assuredly that God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ, fulfilling the Davidic covenant in Christ's resurrection enthronement! Not only Peter, but other New Testament writers confirm the fact of our Lord's enthronement as the fulfillment of

45. *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, pp. 400-01. McClain's interpretation is typical of the older dispensationalism. Darrel Bock, a representative of the "progressive" dispensationalism, admits, "This passage and Luke 1:68-79 also counter the claim that no New Testament text asserts the present work of Jesus as a reigning Davidite sitting on David's throne. . . . As the Davidic heir, Jesus sits in and rules from heaven." His entire article argues against traditional dispensational understanding. "The Reign of the Lord Christ" in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, pp. 49-50.

the Davidic covenant (Mk. 16:19; Acts 5:31; 7:55-56; 13:16-41; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20-23; Phil. 2:9-11; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 8, 13; 8:1; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22).

3. The New Covenant Fulfilled in Christ's Death and Resurrection

Walter Kaiser declared that the most important change in dispensational theology was the denial of the older dispensational doctrine that there were two different New Covenants, one for Israel and one for the Church.⁴⁶ The doctrine had to change. The New Testament not only asserts that the New Covenant is fulfilled in Christ, it also says our very salvation depends upon the establishment of the New Covenant: "And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Mt. 26:27-28; Mk. 14:24; Lk. 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:23).

The apostles are ministers of the New Covenant, a glorious ministry because of the New Covenant promise of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:6-18). The New Covenant, which is better than the Mosaic covenant because of its "better promises" (Heb. 8:6), was established in the death and resurrection of Christ (Heb 8:1-13). Jesus' heavenly session as a priest after the order of Melchizedek is essential to the fulfillment of the New Covenant (Heb. 8:1-3). What premillennialists regard as necessary to the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises, the writer of Hebrews asserts to be an obstruction: "For if he were on earth, he should not be a priest" (Heb. 1:4). The New Covenant order is ruled by the Priest-King who reigns from heaven in the true Holy Place.

The New Covenant promised three blessings that God's people needed for the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants to be fulfilled. It promised the forgiveness of Israel's iniquity (Jer. 31:34), the writing of the law on their hearts⁴⁷ (Jer. 31:33; cf. Eze. 11:19-20; 36:27), and the gift of the Spirit — the very essence of covenantal blessing (Is.

46. Kaiser's response in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, p. 369.

47. Note that Jeremiah speaks in verse 31 of God's making a new covenant with the "house of Israel, and with the house of Judah," but beginning in verse 33 the Lord speaks only of Israel. The new Israel that receives the covenant is in covenantal continuity with the old Israel and Judah. But Israel did not exist as a political entity at the time of Jeremiah's writing. Jeremiah was pointing to something new, something partially fulfilled in the return to the land in the Old Covenant era, but which finds its true fulfillment in the Church as the new Israel, composed of both Jews and Gentiles who are adopted into the Abrahamic covenant by faith.

44:3; Eze. 11:19-20; 36:27; 37:14; 39:29). The gift of the Spirit represents the ultimate covenant blessing expressed in the words “God with us,” the name of the Messiah (Is. 7:14; Mt. 1:23; 28:20). Jesus Himself came to baptize with the Spirit, which is another way of saying that He came to inaugurate the New Covenant (Mt. 3:11; Mk. 1:8; Lk. 3:16; Jn. 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16-17; Gal. 3). The New Covenant era can only begin when the Spirit is bestowed. And the Spirit can only be poured out when Jesus has ascended to the right hand of God (Jn. 7:37-39; 16:7-15; Acts 2:33).

The gift of the Spirit means the final age of blessing — the New Covenant age — has begun. The kingdom of God can now grow to fill the world, because the problems which prevented its growth in the pre-Messianic eras have been solved. Man’s sins have been fully forgiven. The law of God has been inscribed in the hearts of Abraham’s seed (Heb. 8:10; cf. Rom. 8:4). The Holy Spirit has been poured out on Abraham’s seed so that they have the power to extend the kingdom of God by preaching the Word and living lives of covenantal obedience (Jn. 7:38; 15:1-16). So long as they are faithful to the covenant, Satan cannot stand against them (Rom. 16:20; Eph. 6:10ff; Jam. 4:7).

In summary, the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants find their progressive fulfillment in Christ Himself, through Jesus’ heavenly reign during the present era. Dispensationalism misses a basic teaching of the New Testament when it looks for a future fulfillment of the covenants for Israel. The New Testament emphatically affirms the present fulfillment of the covenants in the One who is central to all prophecy: the True Israel, the Last Adam, the Seed, the Son of Man, the Son of God. “For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us” (2 Cor. 1:20).

The fulfillment of the covenants in Christ is the culmination of the covenantal idea throughout the Old Testament. From the promise in Genesis 3:15 to the promise of the New Covenant, there is a gradual progression in the covenant as the promises become greater and more glorious. The resulting New Testament fulfillment of the covenants far surpasses what was seen in the Old Testament. In Christ, the Old Testament promises are transformed and glorified. The promise of land and the implied promise of global dominion are now clearly revealed as the promise of a redeemed world. The whole earth is cleansed and will gradually be brought under Christ’s headship. The promise of seed is glorified by its primary fulfillment in Christ

and is also transformed to become the promise of a new humanity, made up of Jew and Gentile united in Him. The promise of dominion is glorified by the gift of the Spirit to enable God's covenant people to be righteous — the prerequisite for dominion and the defeat of Satan — and to be abundantly fruitful. Dominion is further glorified in giving David's Son a more exalted throne than David ever imagined, in a more wonderful Jerusalem than he ever knew, and in making all of Abraham's seed co-regents with the Son (Eph. 2:6-7; 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6).

Do postmillennialists deny literal fulfillment by saying the covenant promises have been transformed and glorified? Should they seek a fulfillment that is less glorious and, therefore, more "literal"?⁴⁸ To do so is akin to Christians in the resurrection hoping for a less glorious restoration of their bodies! At the same time, it must be emphasized that to glorify the promises is not to spiritualize them as the amillennialists do. On this point, the postmillennialists and dispensationalists agree. If Jesus now reigns in heaven, His righteous rule must bring in the Abrahamic blessing to all the families of the world (Gn. 12:3), for He came not to condemn the world but to save it (Jn. 3:17).

Jesus' Covenantal Rule

When Jesus ascended to the Father, "there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed" (Dn. 7:14). No angel ever received such honor (Heb. 1:13). Neither did David (Acts 2:34). Only Christ has been exalted by God's mighty power and seated "at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come" (Eph. 1:20-21). Unto Him has been given *all* authority — nothing excepted — in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:18).

48. David Turner apparently holds the remarkable view that a future reign from an earthly throne in an earthly Jerusalem would somehow be more glorious than Christ's present reign at God's right hand from the heavenly Jerusalem, for he refers to the present era as a bronze age but the future dispensational earthly kingdom as a silver age. See Turner's essay in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, pp. 264-292.

And of His exercise of that authority it is written, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom" (Heb. 1:8).

Jesus rules now, He rules righteously, and, in terms of Biblical theology, that also means He rules covenantally. The covenant outline from Deuteronomy helps us to understand the implications of the teaching that Jesus is Lord. First, His rule rests in God's transcendent authority. The Last Adam always does what is pleasing to the Father (Jn. 8:29). Second, as we saw above, God has appointed Jesus to be the covenantal Lord of creation as the Last Adam and Messiah. Consequently, all other earthly and heavenly authority is accountable to Him (Mt. 28:18). Third, where there is accountability, there must be a standard. The standard is the ethical instruction of the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation. The whole of Scripture is profitable for instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16-17) and men are therefore accountable in terms of its teaching.⁴⁹

Fourth, if the reign of the Lord Jesus has any historical meaning at all — and it does, unless His authority on earth is a legal fiction — He must be covenantally judging His enemies and blessing His people. In this sense covenantal postmillennialism agrees with dispensationalism that the rule of Christ is "literal." To assert that Christ is not now applying the sanctions of the covenant is to declare that He is not Lord in any meaningful sense of the word. King of kings would become a title without content. His place at the right hand of the Father would be reduced to an honorary position with no real authority. The assurance in Matthew 28:18 that He has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" becomes nothing more than "holy hyperbole." We cannot deny His covenantal judgment in history without reducing the whole New Testament idea of the Lordship of Christ to nonsense. To confess that Jesus reigns is to confess that He judges now in terms of His covenant Word, and is applying the sanctions of the covenant to the nations of the world.

The Abrahamic covenant points to this kind of covenantal judgment when it says that those who bless Abraham will be blessed and those who curse him will be cursed. The Old Testament record shows us how God kept this covenant promise in history before the Cross. Will God now fail to keep this promise to the Seed to Whom

49. Those who have never had the opportunity to know the Scriptures are still accountable in terms of the "the work of the law written in their hearts" (Rom. 2:15).

the Abrahamic covenant pointed and in Whom it is fulfilled? We can rest assured that those who bless Jesus will be blessed and those who curse Him will be cursed, until His blessing fills the world and all of His enemies have been made a footstool for His feet (Acts 2:34-35; 1 Cor. 15:25; Heb. 1:13; 10:13).⁵⁰

Fifth, Christ Himself has been appointed heir of all things (Heb. 1:2). Because He perfectly accomplished the work the Father committed to Him, our Lord Jesus Christ inherited the entire world. All things are His by right of Messianic conquest. Satan stole dominion in the Garden by deceiving men into revolting against God's rule. Although Satan's authority never had any foundation in kingdom law, he had dominion all the same (Mt. 4:8-9). Jesus won back dominion by keeping God's law and dying for man's sins as a covenantal representative. Just as Jesus' suffering ended in the glory of resurrection and inheritance, so, too, the suffering of God's people leads to the inheritance of glory (Rom. 8:16-21).

All things were given to Christ, and in Him, to His people: "all things are yours" (1 Cor. 3:22). The writer of Hebrews says, "Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet. For in that he put all in subjection under him, he left nothing that is not put under him. But now we see not yet all things put under him" (Heb. 2:8). Even though all things are Christ's by inheritance and in Him all things are given to His people, we do not yet see all things brought into submission to Him. In other words, our situation today is similar to that of ancient Israel. The Israelites were promised the land of Canaan as an inheritance from God (Dt. 1:38; 2:31; 3:28; 4:21; 12:10; 15:4; etc), but they could not possess their inheritance without fighting for it (Dt. 31:7; Josh. 1:6; 23:3-6; etc.). In the same way, Christ's Church, in order to take possession of her inheritance, must fight the good fight for the kingdom of God by preaching the Gospel.

50. Dumbrell presents a detailed exegesis of Genesis 12:1-3 that argues, among other things, that "the principle statement of these three verses is contained in the final clause of v. 3 ["in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed"]. The Heb. syntax indicates this and the clause is most probably to be taken as a result clause, indicating what will be the consummation of the promises that the preceding verses have announced. That is to say, the personal promises given to Abram have final world blessing as their aim." *Covenant & Creation*, p. 65.

Covenantal Sanctions and the Growth of the Kingdom

Jesus' covenantal rule is the key to the growth of the kingdom of God in history.⁵¹ To fully understand this, we need to consider God's covenantal rule in the ages before the coming of Christ. We presuppose that there is no fundamental change in covenantal principles between the Old and New covenants, even if the outward forms of the covenant vary. If the fundamental principles of God's covenantal relationship with men changed, it cannot be true that the Old Testament — which is largely what Paul had in view when he wrote 2 Timothy 3:16-17 — is reliable "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." The Old Testament is the record of God's covenantal relationship with man in the period before the coming of Christ. For it to be relevant to us, the basic covenantal principles must be the same.

In the era of the Mosaic Law, God's covenantal rule was manifest especially in Israel. If Israel kept His law, she would be blessed (Dt. 28:1-14; Lv. 26:1-13). Specifically, God promised that Israel would bear fruit abundantly to fulfill the Creation Mandate (Dt. 28:4; Lv. 26:9), namely, that she would experience economic prosperity (Dt. 28:5, 8, 11-12; Lv. 26:4-5), defeat her Satanic enemies (Dt. 28:7; Lv. 26:7-8), enjoy blessing in the land (Dt. 28:3, 6; Lv. 26:5-6), and exercise dominion over the nations (Dt. 28:1, 7, 10, 12-13). The supreme blessing was, of course, that God would be with her (Lv. 26:9, 12). Since all of the blessings promised in Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26 are found in some form in the promises given to Abraham (cf. Gn. 12:1-3; 15:18ff; 17:1-21; 18:18-19; 22:16-18; etc.), the blessing can be simply stated in these terms: If Israel obeyed God, she would enjoy all the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Dt. 30:19-20; Lv. 26:40-42).

If she disobeyed God, she would be cursed (Dt. 28:15-68; Lv. 26:14-39). The list of curses is much longer than the list of blessings. The point is clear: the penalty for disobedience was to be cut off from the Abrahamic inheritance. Even the curse, however, included the promise that repentance would bring restoration (Lv. 26:40-42, 44-45; Dt. 30:1-3).

The blessings and the curses of the covenant were essential to the whole idea of covenantal rule in the Old Testament. Since covenantal principles remain the same, it

51. For a fuller discussion of the covenantal rule of Christ and its implications for eschatology, see Gary North, *Millennialism and Social Theory* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990).

follows that Christ's rule in the New Covenant must also include covenantal sanctions. If Jesus is the Seed of Abraham in Whom the covenant is fulfilled, His New Covenant rule over the Church must include the blessings and curses of the covenant. These sanctions are not to be limited to the "spiritual" realm. They are real and manifest in the here and now. Jesus Christ is Lord over all the earth. The blessings and curses of His rule under the New Covenant have an earthly and physical manifestation, just as they did under the Old Covenant.

Another important observation on God's covenantal rule in the Old Testament era comes from an interesting expression in the curses of the covenant: "all the diseases of Egypt" (Dt. 28:60; 7:15). To be cursed is to be like Egypt. In other passages, to be cursed is to be like Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Dt. 29:23; Zep. 2:9; etc.). But these are Gentile nations not in covenant with God. Why are they cursed? Why was Jonah sent to Nineveh to warn them that they would soon be the object of God's special wrath? Why did the prophets pronounce God's curse on other Gentile nations such as Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, and Moab? The answer is clear: because God's covenantal rule, which was especially manifest in Israel, was never limited to Israel alone. His throne was and is over all.⁵²

So, too, the rule of Christ. Though primarily concerned with the Church, Christ's rule cannot be limited to the Church. In the Old Testament, covenant curse or blessing on all of the nations of the world was essential to the Abrahamic covenant (Gn. 12:3). The nations of the ancient world experienced God's blessing or curse in terms of their relationship to Israel and her law. Since Christ is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, it is no less true today that His rule extends over all the world, both for blessing and for curse.

As ancient Israel once was, the Church is now the heart of the kingdom of God.⁵³ In the Church the blessings and discipline of the covenant are manifest with greatest clarity. As Peter said, "For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of

52. See Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, expanded edition, 1984), pp. 339-64.

53. For a fuller account of Christ's kingdom rule and how He brings in the kingdom by blessing the Church, see Peter Leithart, *The Kingdom and the Power: Rediscovering the Centrality of the Church* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1993).

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God?" (1 Pet. 4:17). In John 15, Jesus uses the covenantal language of the Old Testament to define the Church's relationship to Him and her growth in history. He promised that when Christians keep God's commandments, they are blessed and bear fruit abundantly — the blessing of the covenant (Jn. 15:1-16). Disobedience brings discipline (Jn. 15:6; cf. 1 Cor. 11:29-32; Mt. 18:17-20). Covenantal faithfulness — abiding in Christ — is the key to blessing and growth in the New Covenant no less than in the Old.

Because the Church is composed of sinners, she needs covenantal discipline to grow in grace. Christ's discipline of the Church includes external enemies — Viking bands, Muslim armies, Mongol hordes — as well as internal ones — Arians, Pelagians, liberal theologians. Suffering is an essential part of our earthly battle, but it is suffering unto victory. Jesus is leading His Bride in world conquest (Rev. 19:11-16), as Joshua led Israel to conquer the promised land.

Though Israel was more or less confined to the land, the Church is commanded to spread the kingdom over the entire earth (Mt. 28:18-20). The preaching of the Gospel converts individuals, families, and nations and disciplines them in their dominion task.

Nations that reject the Gospel are cursed. Either they repent and turn to Christ, or they disappear from history.⁵⁴ Earthquakes, fires, tornados, wars, famine, pestilence — these and other "natural," political, and economic calamities are Jesus' covenantal judgments.⁵⁵ Hitler was released on apostate Europe in much the same way that Nebuchadnezzar was released upon apostate Judah, except that Nebuchadnezzar converted to faith in the LORD (Dn. 4:34ff.). The nations are blessed and judged by King Jesus in terms of His covenant law. But the aim of Christ's judgment is the salvation of the world. In time, all the world will be saved and Christ's name will be praised in every land. The original Creation Mandate will be fulfilled in history as

54. For insights on the economic implications of Christ's covenantal rule, see Gary North's main essay and responses to others in Robert G. Clouse, ed., *Wealth & Poverty: Four Christian Views of Economics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984).

55. Christians used to take this for granted, even when they did not have a covenantal worldview. But to assert today, for example, that third-world poverty is the result of Jesus' covenantal judgment is considered so offensive that Art Gish says of one who holds that view, "North sounds more like a Pharisee than a New Testament Christian." *Wealth & Poverty*, p. 78.

men build a global Christian civilization that develops the creation to its highest level of glory. Then and only then will history come to an end.

Conclusion

Both premillennialism and amillennialism fail to present a Biblical view of God's covenantal kingdom. This is a failure to offer a fully Biblical worldview, a failure that has tremendous practical consequences for the Church. Hoekema quotes Hendrikus Berkof's profound statement of the Church's present defeatism.

The twentieth-century Church of Christ is spiritually unable to stand against the rapid changes that take place around her because she has not learned to view history from the perspective of the reign of Christ. For that reason, she thinks of the events of her own time in entirely secular terms. She is overcome with fear in a worldly manner, and in a worldly manner she tries to free herself from fear. In this process God functions as no more than a beneficent stop-gap.⁵⁶

The remedy to this condition is a return to the Biblical covenantal worldview.⁵⁷ In particular, we should understand the present unfolding of the kingdom of God in the following terms:

1. Christ rules from heaven as the Melchizedekian Priest-King over all creation. He is fulfilling the Davidic promise of kingship and pouring out the blessings of the New Covenant on the world that He died to save, and that He is now leading to salvation through His Spirit's work in the Church.

56. *The Bible and the Future*, p. 23.

57. Ray Sutton, *That You May Prosper*.

2. The Church, the seed of Abraham, rules the world in and with Christ. Her first task is Biblical worship of Christ. Her members also rule as His representatives, priest-kings on earth under His authority. Their authority in Christ is limited and divided into the distinct covenantal institutions of family, church, and state.
3. Christ has given His Church a detailed and definite law-word to which she must submit and with which she must rule. His detailed, ethical instruction defines the duties of Christian individuals, families, churches, and states.
4. Christ applies the sanctions of the covenant to His Church in history. He disciplines her so that she will grow and develop into the full possession of the kingdom. He blesses her for obedience to His law-word so that she will bear fruit more abundantly. He punishes her when she is disobedient so that she will return to Him. His blessings and curses are distributed both indirectly through the covenantal agencies that He has ordained and directly in the manifold working of His wisdom.
5. Christ's inheritance of all things is the legal foundation for the Church's conquest of the world. She is His co-heir. But she must work to actually possess the inheritance. It gradually becomes hers as she spreads the Gospel and applies the teaching of the law where she has dominion. In the end, the whole world will be transformed, as Jesus leads the Church to realize the Creation Mandate in history. When the historical work is done, the kingdom will be committed to the Father, and the Church will receive her eternal reward.

The covenantal worldview of the Bible is our basis for confident evangelism, for we know that Christ died to save the world, and He reigns on high to lead history to a

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glorious end. He will bless our evangelistic efforts by His Holy Spirit. The Biblical covenantal worldview is the basis of our assurance that our cultural labor has meaning, for we know that our work is part of a larger historical movement. God's kingdom is being realized in part through us. Artistic, industrial, educational, political, familial, and every other kind of human endeavor are necessary to the growth of the kingdom of God. The Biblical covenantal worldview calls us to worship the Triune God as our primary task, for the Church is a nation of priests. The kingdom of God grows as the influence of the Spirit flows through the Church.

"For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith" (1 Jn. 5:4).

CONCLUSION

I have heard Christians profess to being uncommitted and unconcerned about eschatology. There are pro-millennialists: "Whatever it is, I'm for it." And pan-millennialists: "It will all pan out." No doubt Christians who refer to eschatology in these terms are expressing their frustration over the acrimony which not infrequently characterizes debates over eschatology, rather than their actual attitude toward the Biblical doctrine of the millennium. The fact remains, however, that it is intellectually frivolous and morally irresponsible not to seek answers about the doctrine of eschatology. To treat eschatology as an appendix to the Christian faith is to distort virtually every fundamental teaching of the Bible.

God created the world immature (cf. Gn. 1:28). The doctrine of eschatology is the Biblical teaching about God's purposes in creation and their realization through redemptive grace, in spite of the rebellion of men against Him (cf. Rev. 21-22). God has sent a Second Adam to succeed where the first Adam failed through sin (Rom. 5:12ff.). As the head of a new race of man, Jesus our Lord has given us the Holy Spirit to open our hearts and lead us to faith and also, by teaching us His word, to enable us to live a life of good works for His glory (cf. Rom. 8:1-14; et al.). The Bible gives us the instruction that we need to live for the glory and praise of our heavenly Father (2 Tim. 3:16-17), so that we can fulfill the purpose for which He has created us.

To be brief, the doctrines of creation, the covenant, man, redemption, the Messiah, the work of the Holy Spirit, the inspiration of the Bible and the Christian life — to mention only a few — are clearly wedded to the doctrine of eschatology. What God has put together, let not man put asunder!

In my argument I have especially emphasized the covenant because it provides

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the structure for Biblical revelation. God created the world in covenant with Himself, with man as the covenant lord of the creation. God rules the world by His covenant from the beginning of history to the end. All of man's life, therefore, is covenantal. Understanding God's covenant is the key to understanding not only eschatology, but the whole of the Bible.

Recovering the Biblical doctrine of the covenant is vital to the recovery of the whole Christian worldview and the courage to fight for its realization in history. So long as Christians believe that history develops randomly, or that history is committed to Satan, they will not invest their hearts, their time, or their money in God's kingdom. Eventually, however, God will raise up a generation that trusts Him and will follow His commandments. They will see fulfilled the promise of Christ: "I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples" (Jn 15:5-8).

In these four chapters, I have written the basic arguments that persuaded me to become a postmillennialist. Whether or not the reader is persuaded, I hope that he will take the eschatological debate seriously. If we are not certain what to believe, it is incumbent upon us to continue to pray and study until we find Biblically persuasive answers to our questions. If we have reached convictions, it is our duty to live by them.

If it is really true, as Hal Lindsey and others teach, that Christ is coming soon, perhaps by the year 1981 1988 1989 1995 2000, then Christians should be in the streets witnessing. One's job future, the children's education, political concerns, investments in real estate, stocks and bonds, in short, anything that concerns life in this world should be put aside as we prepare ourselves for the imminent end. If you believe in Christ's soon return, live like it. Like James said, "faith without works is dead" (Jms. 2:17). Show your faith by your works.

Some premillennialists, of course, disagree with Hal Lindsey and the date-setting

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type of teacher. They believe that Christ may come any minute and so they must be prepared for His coming today. They also believe that Christ may not come today and so they must live for tomorrow. Cultural labor for God's glory *may* be meaningful, if Christ does not come soon, for it is a means of evangelism and a form of worship. But if Christ is coming soon, it may also be a waste of time, since it takes years of education and labor to accomplish anything important in cultural evangelism. It might be good to invest money in the future, since Christ may not come for another hundred years, and children are important. But if Christ is coming soon, that money would be much better spent on evangelism. On the other hand . . .

Rather than go on like this, let me say it to you directly: If you believe in this type of premillennialism, you are in intellectual limbo. The best thing you can do is switch your theology. Can an eschatological doctrine that speaks with a "forked tongue" be true?

If you are an unpersuaded amillennialist, you will have to decide whether or not you agree with the date-setting premillennialists, like some amillennialists apparently do. If that is what you believe, live like the Hal Lindsey-type premillennialists. If, on the other hand, you think history may go on for a few centuries and there may be some real benefit in Christian cultural endeavor, live like a postmillennialist. Also, if you are theologically inclined, take the time to read the books listed in the footnotes and write a book to refute postmillennialism.

If you are persuaded of postmillennialism, then you believe that Christ has called us to build His kingdom by the power of the Holy Spirit. You should be enthusiastically pursuing distinctly Christian cultural advance either by your own efforts or by financing others who are gifted by God. You should be dedicating yourself to training the next generation to be better and wiser Christians than the present one. If you have children, make certain that you provide a Christian education for them. Political concerns and financial investments, too, are part of your responsibility as a citizen of the heavenly kingdom. Evangelism must not be less emphasized, but actually more emphasized, for the Holy Spirit will only save the world through the preaching of God's people. Rather than relegate evangelism to the few hours a week that one has time for witnessing in the streets, the postmillennialists sees evangelism in broader terms. Witnessing in the street is fine in its place. But it is more important to develop a worldview and lifestyle that are so distinctly Christian that one is

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evangelizing in all that he does, for “whether we eat or whether we drink,” we are to do all “for the glory of God.” When the non-Christians see that we live to the glory of God, they will be converted.

Whatever we believe about the millennium, we should seek to live consistently with our faith. Lukewarm, lazy Christianity is an abomination to God (Rev. 3:16). Christian debate over doctrine is not a hobby or a game, nor can it be carried on as an academic exercise. It is serious pursuit of the truth, conducted in the fear of God. We are seeking an answer to the most important question we face in our daily lives: “How must I live to glorify God?”

May Jesus Christ our Lord grant understanding to His Church by the grace of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Appendix One

COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS

There are many Reformed critiques of dispensationalism available. Among the best are: the gentle but penetrating analysis by Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*; the detailed work by Curtis I. Crenshaw and Grover E. Gunn III, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow*; and the humorous and devastating newsletter by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Dispensationalism in Transition*.¹ Although there is overlap between them, they each provide different perspectives from which to consider the basic issues.

Reformed critiques have been so numerous and so successful, in fact, that dispensationalists themselves have joined the bandwagon. Some of the most helpful evaluations of dispensational errors have been provided by a new school of dispensationalism. Though often merely repeating from a modified dispensational perspective what Reformed theologians have said before, they may communicate best to other dispensationalists. Among these the two best may be Robert L. Saucy's *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* and the collection of articles edited by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*.

The new dispensationalists, however, have missed the heart of the issue. They cling on to the idea of a dispensation without realizing that this very idea is the real problem with dispensationalism. Even Reformed critics have not always dealt adequately with this important issue. The first problem with dispensationalism is the notion of a dispensation.

1. Available online.

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The problem with the idea of a dispensation is not that it is entirely unBiblical, though dispensationalism distorts the Biblical concept. The problem is that dispensationalists have not noticed that their definition of a dispensation fits almost exactly the Biblical definition of a covenant. Thus, while denying that the covenant is the key Biblical doctrine that unifies and explains history, dispensationalists have brought in a modified covenantal idea by the back door. By contrasting their view with the “covenantal” view of history, dispensationalists have introduced no little confusion into theological debate. And by misunderstanding the Biblical doctrine of the covenant, they have also significantly distorted the Biblical philosophy of history, including the Biblical teaching about how Christ’s death and resurrection relate to history and eschatology.

The Dispensational Definition of a Dispensation

Dispensationalists tell us that the progress of world history must be understood in terms of the idea of a dispensation. The definition of this word is, therefore, crucial. On the basis of his understanding of the Biblical words *oikonomeo* (to be a steward), *oikonomos* (steward), and *oikonomia* (stewardship, etc.), Charles C. Ryrie gives us the following definition of a dispensation:²

- (1) Basically there are two parties — the one whose authority it is to delegate duties and the one whose responsibility it is to carry out these charges....
- (2) There are specific responsibilities....
- (3) Accountability as well as responsibility is part of the arrangement..
..
- (4) A change may be made at any time unfaithfulness is found in the existing administration....

Ryrie also asserts that: “The dispensations are economies instituted and brought

2. *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1965] 1971), p. 26. Please note: we are speaking of the definition of a dispensation, not the definition of dispensationalism.

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to their purposeful conclusion by God.”³ Though these “economies” are instituted in history, Ryrie emphasizes that “a dispensation is primarily a stewardship arrangement and not a period of time.”⁴ His summary statement is:

Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In this household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these economies are the dispensations.⁵

Given this understanding of a dispensation, there are two important questions we must ask. 1) Where in the Bible do we find the idea that history is divided into “dispensations.” 2) How do the dispensationalists relate the idea of a dispensation to the idea of a covenant? In answer to the first question, Ryrie strains Ephesians 1:10 “the dispensation of the fulness of times” and Ephesians 3:2 the “dispensation of the grace of God” to obtain a dogmatic conclusion that will not even persuade all dispensationalists: “there can be no question that the Bible uses the word dispensation in exactly the same way the dispensationalist does.”⁶ Ryrie is on better ground when he argues “it should be remembered that it is perfectly valid to take a Biblical word and use it in a theological sense as long as the theological use is not unbiblical.”⁷ No one doubts the truth of this assertion. What may be doubted is that Ryrie’s idea of a

3. Ibid., p. 30.

4. Ibid., p. 29.

5. Ibid., p. 31. It is difficult to see how Ryrie can actually de-emphasize the idea of a time period since each “economy” is a “stage” of revelation “in the process of time.” The “progressive dispensationalist” Robert L. Saucy appears satisfied with a simpler definition. For him dispensations are simply “various periods of human history brought about through the progressive revelation of God’s salvation program.” See Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), p. 13.

6. *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 27; italics are Ryrie’s.

7. Ibid., p. 28; italics are in the original.

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dispensation is actually Biblical. By replacing the Bible's own covenantal framework with a similar, but different idea, dispensationalism is guilty of at least being less Biblical than covenant theology.

Dispensationalists do not deal with the second question. They frequently discuss the covenants, especially as the foundation for their premillennialism.⁸ But they make no real attempt to explain the relationship between the ideas of a Biblical covenant and a dispensation. God is leading history through dispensational periods, some of which — at least the Noahic, Abrahamic, and Mosaic — are based upon covenants, but somehow the two notions of covenant and dispensation remain unintegrated. This is a fatal flaw in the dispensational system, one that contributes to a false notion of the dispensations usually labeled "law" and "grace," and also to distortions — sometimes gross — of the Biblical teaching on the new covenant.

A Covenantal Definition of a Dispensation

Poythress points out that "Virtually all ages of the church and all branches of the church have believed that there are distinctive dispensations in God's government of the world, though sometimes the consciousness of such distinctions has grown dim."⁹ In this broad sense, then, many non-dispensationalists may be called dispensationalists. Arnold D. Ehlert's *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism*, for example, includes the Reformed postmillennialist, Jonathan Edwards, as a dispensationalist because Edwards spoke of redemptive epochs.¹⁰ Ryrie points out that Isaac Watts saw the progress of redemption unfolding through dispensational periods in a manner very similar to that of the Scofield Bible.¹¹ To mention only one more example, the famous Dutch Reformed theologian, Herman Witsius (1636-1708), described the covenants between God and man through history in a broadly

8. For example, Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953 [1972]).

9. Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 9-10.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

11. *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 73-74.

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dispensational scheme.¹² The question, then, is not whether Reformed theologians can tolerate the idea of distinctive epochs in God's government of the world. The problem is, rather, the nature of these redemptive epochs. A Biblical approach must take into account the doctrine of the covenant.

Covenant theology may be simply defined as that theology which recognizes Robert Rollock's principle: "God says nothing to man apart from the covenant." This is an essential principle for Biblical interpretation. One of the most fundamental ideas of the entire New Testament, for example, finds its explanation here. Paul teaches that all men are either "in Adam" or "in Christ" (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21ff.). But how do we understand the words "in Adam all die"? Paul is not speaking of a physical relationship nor of an undefinable mystical idea. "In Adam" and "in Christ" describe man's covenantal status before God. "In Adam" is equivalent to "under the old covenant which Adam broke," and "in Christ" equivalent to "in the new covenant with Christ as representative before God." The book of Hebrews refers to this when it explains that Christ brings salvation by bringing in a new covenant: "But now hath He obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also He is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second" (Heb. 8:6-7).

The Bible, thus, divides first of all into old covenant and new covenant eras.¹³ Within the old covenant era, however, there are numerous covenantal periods. These covenantal periods can be described in terms very similar to Ryrie's definition of a dispensation, because Ryrie has inadvertently borrowed the covenantal idea through the concept of "stewardship." Ray Sutton's covenantal outline¹⁴ applies to these periods of history:

1. God sovereignly granted a covenant, appointing stewards and

12. *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man* (Escondido, Cal.: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990).

13. Please note that this is not the same as Old Testament and New Testament. The Bible never refers to a division of books such as Old Testament and New Testament. From the Biblical perspective there is more than one covenant, but there is only one covenantal revelation.

14. See Chapter Four above.

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defining responsibilities and rewards. [This is part of Ryrie's point one.]

2. Stewards had a God-granted sphere of authority to rule for His glory. [This is also included in point one of Ryrie's four points.]

3. The authority of the stewards was limited by and their rule was guided by God's commandments. [This is Ryrie's second point.]

4. There was a blessing promised for faithfulness and a warning of the curse for unfaithfulness. [This is Ryrie's third point, accountability.]

5. In the old covenant era, each dispensation ended in failure, just like Adam did, because salvation from sin had not yet been accomplished. But each time God graciously granted a renewal of the old covenant, expanding the revelation of His grace and the promise of salvation. [This is Ryrie's fourth point, the possibility of disinheritance for unfaithfulness.]¹⁵

In the book of Genesis, dispensationalists have correctly identified the covenantal eras: from Adam to Noah, Noah to Abraham, Abraham to Moses. But they have not observed that the giving of the Davidic covenant constitutes a new "dispensation" which ends with Israel's captivity, nor that God granted a new covenant to Israel upon her return to the land which lasted until the coming of Christ. Because they do not follow the Bible's own covenantal outline they have misunderstood the periods of redemptive history.

This would not be terribly important if it were just a matter of the number of dispensations. A slightly different count doesn't change much. The real problem is that dispensational theology has traditionally seen the dispensations as periods that are not only distinct but largely separate, each dispensation operating on fundamentally different principles. By not recognizing that each period is a covenantal period, dispensational theology replaces the Biblical doctrine of the organic growth of God's

15. It is interesting to note that not only has Ryrie given a definition that follows exactly Ray Sutton's five-point outline for the covenant, but he even gives the points in the same order, though he combines one and two.

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covenantal revelation with the dispensational doctrine of a fragmented revelation.

In Reformed theology a “dispensation” is a covenantal period.¹⁶ Fundamentally, there are just two “dispensations,” the dispensation of the old covenant and the dispensation of the new. The old covenant itself is divided into various covenantal administrations, but covenant theology sees the various covenants before the coming of Christ as extensions of the creation covenant that include an unfolding revelation of the promise of the new covenant. Each of these covenantal periods may be referred to as a “dispensation” of the old covenant. But these dispensations are part of the organic growth of the kingdom of God in history and cannot be divorced or isolated from one another. Each “new” covenant presupposes and builds upon the previous covenant revelation, which is of continuing relevance. Not one of the covenants is simply abrogated.¹⁷ In the end all of them, including the Mosaic, are fulfilled in the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and session of Jesus Christ, bringing salvation.

Viewing the dispensations through the stewardship model, the main difference between Reformed and dispensational theology is that dispensationalism believes that point three of the covenant, what Ryrie refers to as specific responsibilities, can be widely disparate in different dispensations. Dispensationalists see the dispensations of law and grace, for example, as involving systems of ethics that are radically diverse. Covenant theology, on the other hand, emphasizes that differences between the specific commandments of God — about priesthood, sacrifices, land, clothing, food, etc. — do not concern basic ethical issues, that there is one unified system of ethics taught in the Bible.

16. Reformed readers who object to the very use of the word “dispensation” should call to mind the Westminster Confession of Faith VII:6 in which occur the words, “There are not therefore two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations.” Rather than throw the word out, Reformed theology should reclaim it by correctly defining it.

17. So-called “progressive dispensationalism” views the relations between the dispensations in a manner very similar to covenant theology. However, because they do not see the growth of the kingdom of God in terms of covenants, they have more or less the same problem as other dispensationalists.

Conclusion

The most important result of the failure by dispensational theology to see the covenantal nature of history is the misinterpretation of the new covenant. Older dispensational theologians even invented the doctrine of two “new covenants” in order to keep the church age separate from the entire Old Covenant era and from their idea of a future restoration of the Old Covenant era in a Jewish millennial kingdom.¹⁸ But this doctrine is so exaggerated that it could not remain. Eventually dispensationalists had to acknowledge that there was only one New Covenant and that the Church shares in the “spiritual blessings” of the New Covenant.¹⁹

Dispensationalists could not stop there either. They could not escape from the fact that the New Testament use of the Old Testament presupposes a far more profound continuity than dispensationalism could tolerate. Progressive dispensationalists now admit that the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants apply to the church age. What they insist on, however, is that “the present operation of the new covenant in saving Jews and Gentiles in the Church is not the complete fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy. The return of Christ will bring further fulfillment.”²⁰

The progressive dispensationalists have missed two important points. One is the fact previously explained that a dispensation is a covenantal period and that each new covenant brings in a new dispensation. The second point, naturally following, is that the new covenant fulfills all of the promises of the various dispensations of the old covenant and is the final covenant. To have another dispensation — a Jewish millennium — following the present one places upon the theologian the burden of the fiat creation of another new covenant, as in the older form of dispensationalism. The New Testament is clear, however, on the finality and perfection of the new covenant in Christ (esp. Heb. 8-10). There can be no new covenant beyond the new

18. Ryrie argued at length for the idea of two new covenants in his *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, pp. 108-125. See also Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), vol. 7, pp. 98f.

19. Saucy refuted the older dispensational notion of two new covenants in his *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), pp. 77-82.

20. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 139.

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covenant already granted in Christ, neither can there be a future dispensation greater than the present, unless we consider eternity another dispensation. What there can be is the growth of God's kingdom through the preaching of the Gospel so that the promises of the new covenant are completely fulfilled and the glory of God revealed in history.

Dispensationalists have contributed to the growth of Biblical theology by their insistence on the dynamic growth of God's revelation in history. But they undermined what they attempted to teach by their fragmented view of historical development. At the opposite extreme, some versions of covenant theology had a virtually static view of God's revelation, missing the growth of the new covenant promise in the dispensations of the old covenant. More recent covenant theology admits "dispensational" periods in the growth of God's covenantal revelation, but it understands these in the larger context of covenantal unity.²¹ Covenantal postmillennialism is more faithful to the Biblical insights of dispensationalism than dispensationalists themselves, providing not only a dynamic view of history as the growth of God's covenantal kingdom, but also following the Apostles' teaching on the new covenant as the covenant of the Messiah in whom all of the promises of God are Yea and Amen (2 Cor. 1:19-20)!

21. An excellent book explaining the growth of the covenant over time is James Jordan's *Through New Eyes* (Brentwood, Tennessee: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1988).

Appendix Two

A Neglected Millennial Passage from Saint Paul

I have borrowed the title above from the premillennialist Robert D. Culver, whose article bearing it appeared in *Bibliotheca Sacra* in 1956.¹ In his article, Culver pointed out correctly that the notion of two resurrections with a millennium separating them is "the prime essential affirmation of premillennialism."² Alas, however, "It is the usual thing for discussion of this subject to proceed as if the twentieth chapter of Revelation contains the only essential data on the subject — as if the whole issue of a further probationary period after the parousia of Christ could be settled once and for all if a period of time between a future resurrection of the just and another of the unjust could be discovered in or expelled from that passage. Granted that Revelation 20 is the most complete passage on the subject, its value as definitive evidence is hampered by the fact that it appears as part of an apocalypse or vision. Of prophetic visions Moses was told there would always be something less than 'mouth to mouth' speech, 'even apparently and not in dark speeches' (Num 12:8). All informed persons who attempt exposition of the Book of Revelation will heartily agree."³

Therefore, Culver would like to find a passage outside of Revelation that contains the "prime essential affirmation." He thinks that 1 Corinthians 15:20-24 fits the bill.

1. Robert D. Culver, "A Neglected Millennial Passage from Saint Paul," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 113, no. 450, April, 1956, p. 142.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

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Here we have a passage “from the prosaic, usually factual and direct pen of Paul,” one that discusses the resurrection plain language. In Culver’s words “it is difficult to find even a common figure of speech.”⁴ Culver believes that if he can demonstrate this passage supports premillennialism, he will have placed the doctrine upon a more secure foundation. For the premillennialist who, in contrast with the postmillennialist, bases his doctrine primarily upon passages written in figurative language, this is a pertinent concern.

On the other hand, if 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 offers clear support for postmillennialism, as I have suggested in chapter one, it provides one of the most explicit statements of the postmillennial vision in all of Scripture.

The Premillennial Interpretation

How, then, does Culver interpret this passage? The premillennial interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:22-28 proceeds along the following lines. In Adam all die, so in Christ, all men shall be resurrected in the future (vs. 22).⁵ But there is a God-determined order of three different groups. To begin with, Christ Himself is resurrected as the firstfruits (23a). Then, Christians are resurrected at His parousia (23b). Finally, at the end of the millennium, the rest of the dead are raised (24a). The quotation of Psalm 110:1 in verse 25 and the picture of Christ handing over the kingdom in verse 24 would be understood with reference to the millennial age, at the very end of which death itself is destroyed (vs. 26).⁶

While this interpretation seems plausible at first, upon scrutiny, it will be seen to labor under severe difficulties. First, the initial words of verse 24, εἰτα τὸ τέλος (literally, “then, the end”), seem hardly to fit the premillennial view. It is indeed true that εἰτα (“then”) implies some sort of interval after the parousia and before the end. As the premillennialist Godet indicates, the length of the interval is unspecified; εἰτα implies a “longer or shorter interval between the advent and what he [Paul] calls the

4. This is not strictly true. Paul uses various figures such as “firstfruits,” the notion of death as an enemy, and the covenantal expressions “in Adam” and “in Christ.”

5. For Culver’s interpretation, it is vital that the words “in Christ shall all be made alive” refer to *all* men, so that the resurrection of the unjust may be included in the following context.

6. For some reason, Culver limits his discussion, and apparently his research into the context also, to verses 20-24, a mistake which has serious consequences for his understanding of the context.

end.⁷ What the premillennial interpretation requires us to believe, however, is that Paul speaks of a parousia which brings in a thousand year glorious reign of Christ, but for some reason, he passes over that age in silence. We are to understand that Paul refers to a premillennial parousia and then jumps immediately to the end of the millennium, almost as if the intervening 1000 glorious years were not so important. It could be argued, of course, that his particular purpose in the passage was not to expound the millennium, but it still strikes me as remarkably odd that a millennium, in which all of history is to find its glorious climax, could be passed over here without so much as a single word.

There is another difficulty concerning the use of the word $\varepsilon\hat{\iota}\tau\alpha$. Though it may be said to imply an interval in most, or even all, cases where it is used, there is no example in the New Testament of $\varepsilon\hat{\iota}\tau\alpha$ being used of a long interval.⁸ But in the premillennial scheme, the interval from the parousia to the end is at least 1000 years — and it may be longer, for some premillennialists understand the 1000 years of Revelation figuratively. Neither in the LXX, nor in the Apocrypha, nor in the New Testament is there any example of $\varepsilon\hat{\iota}\tau\alpha$ being used to imply such an extended period of time. It seems all the more unlikely, then, that Paul would take a word which regularly connotes a relatively short interval and include within it not only the time, but also all the glory of the millennial kingdom.

A second, and more important, problem concerns the doctrine of the resurrection in the context of Paul's discussion. Paul speaks of death as the last enemy to be destroyed (vs. 26). But in the premillennial view, there is a resurrection before the millennium, and that resurrection is the resurrection of God's people — those who share in the resurrection glory of Christ. Thus, death as an enemy has already been destroyed long before the end. The problem here cannot be evaded by the idea that Paul is speaking of death in the abstract so that it is not until the end of the millennium that it is finally defeated, for Paul himself, later in this chapter, identifies the defeat of death with the time of the resurrection and transformation of God's

7. Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, reprint, 1977), p. 787.

8. See: Mk. 4:17, 28; 8:25; Lk. 8:12; Jn. 13:5; 19:27; 20:27; 1 Cr. 15:5, 7, 24; 1 Tm. 2:13; 3:10; Hb. 12:9; Jms. 1:15.

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people (15:51-57). Consideration of the larger context demonstrates that in the discussion of the most crucial point, the resurrection of God's people, premillennialism cannot be reconciled with Paul's words.

There is a third problem, the one which presents the most formidable challenge to the premillennial interpretation. Paul says that Jesus must reign until death has been destroyed (vs. 25-26). Now the premillennialist must interpret this to mean that the millennial reign of Jesus will continue until death is defeated after the millennium. But this not only runs into the problem with the timing of the resurrection victory of God's people pointed out above, it ignores the fact that Paul, like the rest of the apostles, everywhere speaks of the resurrection of Christ in association with His enthronement. Like every other writer in the New Testament who addresses the subject, Paul does not speak of Jesus' reign as if it began after the parousia, but as having begun with Jesus' resurrection. Here in 1 Corinthians 15:25, this is all the more clear because Paul quotes from Psalm 110:1.

The first apostle to declare that Psalm 110:1 was fulfilled in the resurrection and ascension of Christ was Peter, in his famous Pentecost sermon: "For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.' Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Ac. 2:34-36). The writer of the book of Hebrews twice refers to Psalm 110:1 being fulfilled in the resurrection and ascension of Christ (Hb. 1:13; 10:12-13), the second time in terms most emphatic: "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God,' and since then has been waiting 'until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.'" (Hb. 10:12-13). In Ephesians, also, Paul alludes to Psalm 110:1 and proclaims unequivocally that the inauguration of Christ's reign took place at the time of His resurrection (Eph. 1:20-22).

In the past, dispensationalists disputed this reading of the New Testament evidence. In most cases, the importance of Psalm 110 and its use in the New Testament was not treated seriously. When it was discussed, the plain obvious sense of Scripture, the literal reading, was denied in favor of a complicated exegesis based upon fine distinctions. Alva J. McClain, for example, discovered in Peter's words not an announcement that Jesus fulfilled the Davidic promise, but a distinction between

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Jesus present session in heaven and the throne of David which He would occupy in the future.⁹ Remarkably, in his massive work on the kingdom of God, McClain does not deal with other quotations of Psalm 110 in the epistles. Other classic dispensational authors are equally silent. In one of the most detailed dispensational studies of prophecy ever published, J. Dwight Pentecost includes no exposition of Peter's pentecostal sermon. Similarly, he references Psalm 110 frequently, but does not expound it.¹⁰ Charles L. Feinberg passes over Peter's sermon superficially.¹¹ John F. Walvoord's famous work, advertised as a "basic text" of premillennial theology, also contains no exposition of Psalm 110 as it is used in Peter's sermon or in the rest of the New Testament.¹²

More recently, however, a "progressive" dispensationalist, Darrell L. Bock, offered a detailed exegesis of the relevant portions of Peter's sermon and came up with results worth citing:

Peter notes that David was a prophet. Not only was David a prophet, he was the conscious beneficiary of an oath God had made to him that one "of the fruit of his [David's] loins" (KJV) would sit on his throne (Acts 2:30). The key term is καθίσαι (to sit), reintroduced in the citation of Psalm 110 (note καθεύ, "sit," in v. 34). The allusion in verse 30 is to Psalm 132:11, a psalm which is strongly Israelish and national in tone (see vv. 12-18). The psalm in turn is a reflection of the promise made to David in 2 Samuel 7, especially verse 12. This 2 Samuel passage is better known as the Davidic covenant. What is crucial is that David's awareness of this covenant promise is immediately linked to his understanding of the resurrection promise in Psalm 16, which in turn is immediately tied to the resurrection proof text of Psalm 110

9. *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), pp. 400-01.

10. *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958).

11. *Millennialism: The Two Major Views* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1936; revised ed. 1980), p. 141.

12. The Millennial Kingdom (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959). It may be mentioned that both Walvoord and Pentecost refer to Harry Ironside as asserting a gap between Psalm 110:1 and verse 2, but this is not related to passages in the New Testament.

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(vv. 31-35). *Being seated on David's throne is linked to being seated at God's right hand.* In other words, Jesus' resurrection-ascension to God's right hand is put forward by Peter as a fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, just as the allusion to Joel fulfills the new covenant. To say that Peter is only interested to argue that Messiah must be raised misses the point of connection in these verses and ignores entirely the allusion to Psalm 132 and the Davidic covenant. This passage and Luke 1:68-79 also counter the claim that no New Testament text asserts the present work of Jesus as a reigning Davidite sitting on David's throne.¹³

Bock has not given due attention to the implications of his exegesis of Peter's sermon for the use of Psalm 110 in the rest of the New Testament. But he does provoke important questions. What would be the theological implications for premillennialism were one to note that the universal New Testament application of Psalm 110:1, as well as Paul's own interpretation in at least one¹⁴ other context, is to the present reign of Christ? And what would it mean to assert that Jesus reign must continue until all His enemies are defeated, the last one being death? Given Bock's understanding of Acts 2, is it not only most natural, but exegetically imperative that we interpret 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 as teaching that Christ's reign began at his resurrection? And is it not clear that the most natural interpretation utterly precludes the premillennial understanding of 1 Corinthians 15:20-28?

If premillennialists do not come up with solid Biblical answers to these questions based upon the kind of careful exegesis that Bock has done in Acts 2, the premillennial view is bound to loose adherents, unless a large number of Christians continue to carefully neglect Culver's "millennial passage."

The Postmillennial Interpretation

The postmillennial reading of 1 Corinthians 15:22-28 follows a more natural

13. Darrell L. Bock in Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, ed. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 49.

14. I favor the view that Paul is the author of Hebrews.

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reading of the text. Paul explicitly mentions only two resurrections. The first resurrection is Christ's; the next is the resurrection of those that are His (15:23). No third resurrection is mentioned in the text and can only be discovered in the words "then comes the end" if it has been imported through the auspices of a theological bias. What Paul stated, and he stated it with emphasis, was not that there would be a third resurrection at the end, but that when the end comes, Jesus will hand over all things to God. He will do this, according to Paul, because He will have accomplished a full victory, not only over all historical enemies, but even over death itself. Man's historical task will have been fulfilled and eternity will begin, without death, sin, or tears, when God is all in all.

Interaction with the premillennial view of vs. 20-28 has already introduced many of the important arguments for a postmillennial exegesis. It may be helpful to restate them here. First, as I pointed out above, Paul mentions two resurrections, no more (vs. 23). Second, the word *εἰτα* does suggest an interval between the coming of Christ and the end. But the interval implied is that which is required to finish the work of judgment prerequisite to the Son's delivering all things to the Father (vs. 24). Paul is not here neglecting to mention the millennial kingdom¹⁵ that occurs during the interval implied between the coming of verse 23 and the beginning of verse 24. What *εἰτα* implies is the interval required for the explicitly referred to abolition of all earthly rule and authority at the final judgment, which is necessary both for the summation of all things in Christ and for the final deliverance of all things to the Father. Third, Paul writes of the reign of Christ as a present reality. Throughout the New Testament, the resurrection of Jesus is the time of His enthronement and Psalm 110 is repeatedly said to have been fulfilled when Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father. To imagine that Paul introduces this frequently quoted passage with a meaning that it nowhere else has, and that Paul expects his readers to understand this wholly unique view of Psalm 110:1 without any explanation of this new meaning is a rendering based upon theological prejudice,¹⁶ not sound exegetical method. This is not to mention the fact

15. Culver's title was right! From his perspective there is a neglected millennial passage here — the one that mentions the kingdom between the parousia and the end.

16. I am not suggesting intentional distortion of the passage on the part of premillennialists, nor do I refer to "theological prejudice" here to imply a sort of exegetical conspiracy on their part. Like everyone else, premillennialists read the Bible in the light of their theology, for theological presuppositions are a

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that the theology of the New Testament as a whole is everywhere a resurrection theology, so that a faithful proclamation of the Gospel proclaims Christ as the resurrected, ascended, seated, and crowned Lord of Lords and King of kings (cf. Ac. 2:25 ff.). Fourth, the last trumpet in verse 52 and the victory over death celebrated in the verses that follow belong to the time of Jesus' coming, when His victory over the last enemy shall be finalized. The resurrection, the coming of Christ, and the end of history are placed together in this context. After the coming of Christ and the associated judgment, there is nothing but "the end" (vs. 24).

Discussion of the passage in terms of the millennial question, however, carries with it the danger of our mistaking Paul's profound theological message, for he was not writing proof texts for a modern debate. He was correcting a false theological notion among the Corinthians. Some in the Corinthian church had denied the future resurrection of all men (15:12). Paul explains to them that to deny the resurrection of the dead is also to deny the resurrection of Christ, and, therefore, in principle to deny the entire Gospel (12-19). Having refuted their views with an argumentum ad absurdum, Paul then offers a positive theological explanation of the meaning of Christ's resurrection for the Christian (20-28). His teaching here is grounded in an important theological idea and his quotation of two important Old Testament texts. Other passages are perhaps alluded to, or at least provide a background for Paul's reasoning here.

The theological idea to which he appeals is the relationship between Adam and Christ. It is such a fundamental part of Paul's doctrine of salvation (cf. Rm. 5:12, ff.) that we must assume the Corinthians are aware of the basic notion. What is important here is the implications of the doctrine of Adam and Christ for the resurrection: "For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead" (15:21). Adam's sin brought death to all men. The only way that the consequences of Adam's sin could be undone was through resurrection, the reversal of death because of Christ's righteousness (cf. Rm. 5:12, ff.). For just as Adam was a

necessary and natural part of reading and interpreting the Bible. Presuppositions that are correct illuminate Scripture by suggesting the relationship of one passage or teaching of Scripture to another. Incorrect presuppositions, on the other hand, run foul of natural exegesis and create problems for the reader. This may be unpleasant, but it is also helpful, for it informs us that we have presuppositions in our theology that we need to revise.

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covenant head whose sin brought about the death of all those for whom he acted as representative, so also, Christ, the head of a new covenant, is the covenant representative of a new humanity, which receives life in Him (15:22).¹⁷

Christ's resurrection has a special significance. To understand it, we must remember that Paul speaks here of the Messiah. It was the Messiah who died for our sins according to the Scriptures of the Old Testament (15: 3) and it was the Messiah who rose again from the dead — again, in accordance with the prophecies of the Old Testament Scriptures (15:4).¹⁸ The resurrection, then, is an essential aspect of Jesus' Messianic work as the covenant Lord of a new humanity.

The resurrection of the Messiah is called the "firstfruits" of the resurrection. If one understands the meaning of the "firstfruits," it will be clear that verse 23 is speaking only of the resurrection of believers.¹⁹ For the resurrection of the Messiah is, by this word "firstfruits," connected inseparably to the resurrection of the saints. The Messiah's resurrection entails the resurrection of the saints, just as Adam's sin and death brought about the death of those he represented. The covenantal work of the Messiah in defeating sin and death must result in resurrection victory for all those He represents. So, later in the context, Paul explains that the saints will be resurrected in the future and given bodies that are appropriate to the glory of the future state (1 Cr. 15:35, ff.). Until then, the Messiah must reign, so that He may put down every enemy of God, for the work of the Messiah in undoing the sin of Adam is not finished until every enemy of God in history is defeated (vs. 25).

It is at this point, verse 25, that Paul clearly quotes Scripture, though it is important to note that the language of verse 24 probably contains an allusion to Psalm

17. It is possible to understand verse 22 as speaking of all men being resurrected in Christ, some to life and others to everlasting damnation. How one views verse 22 does not determine the overall view of the passage, nor its bearing on the millennial question. It simply seems to me more natural to view the two expressions "in Adam" and "in Christ" as being limited.

18. Of course, for Paul, there was no "Old Testament." There is no evidence that he or any other writer of the "New Testament" ever thought of the Bible as two books bound under one cover. There was only one holy book, consisting of Scriptures, in which he included his own writings and those of other apostles.

19. Again, disagreement on this point is not decisive for the millennial debate. It is simply a matter of suggesting what seems clearly to be the most natural theological reading of the text.

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2 and the warfare between the Messiah and the rulers of this world, and may also be alluding to passages such as Isaiah 9:7 and Daniel 7:13-14, which speak of the Messiah's everlasting kingdom.²⁰ Be that as it may, when Paul does specifically quote Scripture in verse 25, he understands the Messiah as presently reigning. It is the present course of history over which Jesus has been given "all authority" (Mt. 28: 18). Death, like every other enemy of God, must be defeated by Jesus for that is what it means for Him to be the last Adam, the covenant Head of a new humanity.²¹ Without the defeat of every enemy including, but not limited to death itself, salvation would not truly be won.

The next Scripture quoted by Paul, and it is only a partial quotation, is Psalm 8:6, "Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet." Did Paul simply borrow the words of this Psalm without intending to connect his present explanation to its overall meaning? That is doubtful since this Psalm celebrates what it means for man to be created in the image of God. The Messiah is the one who fulfills this. Jesus is now in heaven given dominion over all things in His resurrection glory because He defeated Satan and sin definitively at the cross. When all things have finally been subdued under the Messiah,²² then He will offer the creation unto God as One who has completed the mandate originally given to Adam at the creation of the world (Gn. 1:26-28).

To state plainly what Paul implies through his quotation of Scripture, Jesus the Messiah fulfills the covenants of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the Restoration. Or, in words Paul used in another place, "For all the promises of God in Him are yea, and in Him Amen, unto the glory of God by us" (2 Cr. 1:20). Jesus is the New Adam. He has won the right not only to eat the tree of life and to give it to us (Rv. 2:7), but to sit on the throne at the right hand of God and to grant us a place in His

20. Isaiah's "little apocalypse," (Is. 24-27) explicitly quoted later in the chapter, may also inform the text here.

21. Note that speaking of death as an enemy may be an allusion to Isaiah 25:8, Hosea 13:14, and similar passages. In Psalm 56:13, David thanks God for "delivering" his soul from death, where the word "deliver" is one that is often used in contexts that speaking of deliverance from an enemy (Ex. 2:19, 18:4; etc.).

22. "It is God that avengeth me, and subdueth the people under me." (Ps. 18:47; cf. also, Ps. 2:8; 21:8-9; etc.)

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kingdom reign (Rv. 1:6; 5:10; 20:1-6; 1 Pt. 2:9). Our resurrection with Him and session with Him at the right hand of God is not something that is reserved wholly for the future, for we are already raised with Christ and seated in the heavenly places with Him (Eph. 2:6), as co-rulers in His kingdom with Him. Through the spiritual warfare of His people, the victory of the cross is extended and applied (Eph. 6:10 ff.; Rm. 16:20; Rv. 19:11-16), so that the nations of the world may be discipled (Mt. 28:18-20) and God's glory manifest. Paul's quotations of Psalm 110:1 and Psalm 8:6 point to the Messianic victory of Jesus in His resurrection, a glory that we begin to share now and that we shall enjoy with Him forever.

Culver was correct on one point, Paul's words have been sadly neglected in our century. So has the profound exposition of these words by Geerhardus Vos,²³ who long ago (1930) offered the kind of detailed exegesis of Paul's words which illuminates debate. Perhaps my exposition above is more inadequate than I imagine. If so, it will be refuted or rightfully ignored. But progress among evangelicals in the eschatological debate will not come until we offer detailed exegesis and interact with one another in terms of it.

Conclusion

A careful exegesis of 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 discloses Paul's understanding of God's plan for history. In the theology of Paul, Christ is the One who fulfills all the promises of God. Not, however, in some distant future kingdom, but from the time of His resurrection. The resurrection of Christ is emphasized in the New Testament not only to speak of the fact that Jesus conquered death, but also to teach that He is the last Adam in whom the covenants are fulfilled. Postmillennialism is the only eschatological position that fits with Paul's teaching here, not only in terms of the chronological development of the kingdom that Paul describes. What is most important to observe here is the quality and meaning of the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of His people, which is linked to Christ's by the covenant. The resurrection is the beginning of Messiah's kingdom, during which time He will subdue His enemies through the work of the Holy Spirit in His church. Nothing can

23. *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979, reprint), pp. 236, ff.

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prevent the Messiah from conquering the world, for He is a resurrected Lord over whom death has no power and to whom all other powers have been subordinated by God the Father.

It is because Paul's doctrine of the resurrection of Christ is covenantal that it is also postmillennial. And because Paul's doctrine is postmillennial, he ends his discussion of the resurrection with an exhortation for the Church to work for the kingdom.

So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption,

and this mortal shall have put on immortality,

then shall be brought to pass

the saying that is written,

Death is swallowed up in victory.

O death, where is thy sting?

O grave, where is thy victory ?

The sting of death is sin;

and the strength of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God,

which giveth us the victory

through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brethren,

be ye stedfast, unmoveable,

always abounding in the work of the Lord,

forasmuch as ye know

that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

(1 Cor. 15:54-58)

Appendix Three

Understanding the Book of Revelation

The interpretation of Revelation 19 and 20 depends especially upon our understanding of the book of Revelation as a whole. The four common approaches — futurist,¹ historicist,² idealist,³ and preterist⁴ — lead to such different understandings of these controversial sections of the book that we might say the debate is more about one's approach to the book rather than the interpretation of these passages.⁵ The most consistent futurists, dispensationalists, claim that they are doing

1. The futurist believes that the book of Revelation speaks about events that are still in the future. Most futurists see everything from chapter 4 or chapter 6 as yet to be fulfilled. All premillennialists hold to some sort of futurist interpretation, though they vary considerably in their interpretation of the book of Revelation.

2. The historical school of interpretation died from hermeneutical exhaustion. From the time of the Reformation, when this school flourished, almost every new generation tried to find events in history that could be said to fulfill Revelation's prophecies.

3. Idealists say that the symbolism of Revelation was not meant to be applied to one specific sequence of historical events, but, more generally, to the Church of every age and land as she struggles against the world.

4. The word "preterism" comes from a latin root that means "gone by" or "past." The preterist believes that the book of Revelation predicts God's covenantal judgment upon the nation of Israel. It was future, of course, for the Christians who first received it in around A.D. 65, but most of the book is past from our perspective. The judgment on Jerusalem and its temple is seen as the final aspect of the creation of a new covenant people, a new city, and a new temple.

5. The recent book *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* discusses the controversial parts of the book in the context of an overall approach. C. Marvin Pate, ed., *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*

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justice to the book of Revelation because they interpret the book “literally,” at least whenever they think that is possible. Non-dispensational futurists are persuaded that, however they interpret the rest of the book, Revelation 20:1-10 requires an interpretation that acknowledges a millennial kingdom. For the idealist, the millennial question is secondary. Hypothetically speaking, the idealist could hold to any millennial view, except the dispensational form of premillennialism. Historicism as an approach to Revelation has more or less died out, but again, it could be related to more than one millennial position.

The preterist, like the dispensationalist, believes that the historical grammatical approach applies to the book of Revelation no less than to the rest of Scripture. Which is to say, it is not the theory of interpretation *per se*, about which dispensationalists and postmillennialists disagree. Postmillennialists take literally those passages that they think are meant literally, but they take as figurative language many of the passages that the dispensationalist insists are “literal,” or at least “partially literal” (the expression is mine; it seems to fit the way dispensationalists deal with many passages in Revelation). The question, then, is which parts of the book of Revelation are intended by John to be literal and which parts are intended to be figurative. And the answer to that question is provided, I believe, by John himself in the prologue and repeated in the conclusion of his book.

A Literal Interpretation of John’s Introduction and Conclusion

John’s Introduction

Consider the first three verses of the prologue (1:1-20). In this superscription, John introduces his book. He tells us “how and for what purpose the revelation was given”⁶ and pronounces a blessing on those who hear with obedient faith.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

6. Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* in F. F. Bruce, ed., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 63.

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sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: Who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw. Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand. (Rv. 1:1-3)

Here at the very beginning of his book, John announces that Jesus has shown him “things which must shortly come to pass.” These words, if taken literally, would seem to set certain limits within which we should expect the prophecy to be fulfilled. Even if the word “shortly” cannot be precisely defined, one would think that interpreters know well enough what the word means to be able to determine a basic approach to the book of Revelation. This is not, however, the case.

John F. Walvoord, the dispensational premillennial commentator, suggests that the expression *e'n tācei* means “quickly or suddenly coming to pass” which is said to indicate “rapidity of execution after the beginning takes place.” In other words, the “idea is not that the event may occur soon, but that when it does, it will be sudden (cf. Luke 18:8; Acts 12:7; 22:18; 25:4; Rom. 16:20). A similar word, *tachys*, is translated ‘quickly’ seven times in Revelation (2:5, 16; 3:11; 11:14; 22:7, 12, 20).”⁷ Henry Alford also thinks that this expression “must not be urged to signify that the events of apocalyptic prophecy were to be close at hand: for we have a key to its meaning in Luke xviii. 7, 8 . . . where long delay is evidently implied.”⁸

Alford strenuously rejects the interpretation of Hengstenberg, who insists that the word “shortly” implies that the events predicted must take place soon after John prophesies them. However, his reasoning is rather obscure:

7. John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation Of Jesus Christ: A Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), p. 35. Walvoord seems to be following the lead of J. B. Smith’s commentary, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1961), p. 34, but the same opinion has been expressed by others previously.

8. Alford’s *Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Guardian Press, fifth edition, 1875, reprint 1976), p. 545. Robert H. Mounce’s view is similar. He suggests that we must take the words of 1:1 in “a straightforward sense, remembering that in the prophetic outlook the end is always imminent.” Op cit., p. 65.

He [Hengstenberg] (in common with many others) takes them to mean that the events spoken of would very soon *begin* to take place. The axe, he says, lay at the root of the Roman Empire when John wrote this, as it did at the root of the Persian Empire when Daniel wrote. But this interpretation is not borne out by the Greek. $\alpha\delta\epsilon\gamma\nu\epsilon\sigma\theta\alpha\iota\dot{\epsilon}\nu\tau\acute{a}x\epsilon\iota$ is not “which must soon *begin* to come to pass,” but, in the well-known sense of the aorist, “which, in their entirety, must soon come to pass;” $\gamma\nu\epsilon\sigma\theta\alpha\iota$ being in fact, a past tense, “must have come to pass,” “be fulfilled:” . . . So that we are driven to the very same sense of $\dot{\epsilon}\nu\tau\acute{a}x\epsilon\iota$ as that in Luke xviii. above, viz. to God’s *speedy time*, though He seems to delay . . .”⁹

I say that his reasoning is obscure because it would seem that if the natural meaning of the Greek is “must have come to pass,” then it would be better to disagree with Hengstenberg only in so far as he wishes to delay the fulfillment or imply only a partial fulfillment. The natural conclusion from Alford’s analysis of the Greek would seem to be a stronger emphasis on near fulfillment rather than more room for delay. Which is also the conclusion of Dusterdieck, who writes:

$\dot{\epsilon}\nu\tau\acute{a}x\epsilon\iota$ designates neither figuratively the “certainty” of the future, nor the swiftness of the course of things, without reference to the proximity or remoteness of time in which they were to occur. So Ebrard, who appeals in vain to Rom. xvi. 20 and Luke xviii. 8, since not only those passages, particularly Luke xviii. 8 (where the subject is not the concrete future, but a constant rule), are dissimilar to ours, but especially because by the $\dot{\epsilon}\gamma\gamma\acute{u}\varsigma$, ver. 3, it is decided that the *speedy* coming of what is to happen is meant.¹⁰

9. Ibid.

10. Friedrich Dusterdieck, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Revelation of John* in H. A. W. Meyer’s *Commentary on the New Testament* (Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, 1980, reprint of Funk & Wagnalls, 1884 edition.), p. 96.

Dusterdieck's exegesis is persuasive, but we need to consider the other passages adduced by Walvoord. In Acts 12:7 we read: "And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly [ἐν τάχει]. And his chains fell off from his hands." Compare that with Acts 22:18: "And saw him saying unto me, Make haste, and get thee quickly [ἐν τάχει] out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning me." Finally, Acts 25: 4: "But Festus answered, that Paul should be kept at Caesarea, and that he himself would depart shortly [ἐν τάχει] thither." None of these passages imply, or even allow for, a period of delay. The obvious point in each case is that what is commanded must be done immediately. When Paul is told to get out of Jerusalem "quickly," or when Peter is told to arise "quickly," or when Festus says that he will depart "shortly," we would no doubt consider them negligent if they delayed. But there is more.

Dusterdieck points to the use of the word ἐγγύς in verse three¹¹ in the expression "the time is at hand," suggesting that it adds further weight to the "literal" interpretation of ἐν τάχει in verse one. But Alford explains the expression "at hand" by reference to what might be called his "figurative interpretation" of verse one, and adds: "We know little now of relative nearness and distance in point of time: when the day of the Lord shall have opened our eyes to the true measure, we shall see, how near it always was."¹² Walvoord's interpretation is similarly esoteric: "The importance of the prophecy is emphasized by the phrase 'for the time is at hand,' 'the time' (Gr. *kairos*) referring to a period of time. . . . The expression 'at hand' indicates nearness from the standpoint of prophetic revelation, not necessarily that the event will immediately occur."¹³ Is it the importance of the prophecy that is emphasized by the words "the time is at hand" and not, rather, "nearness"? And what is meant by "nearness from the standpoint of prophetic revelation" as opposed to other sorts of nearness? Does a 2,000 year delay comport with the *literal* meaning of these words?

Maybe we should ask a different question. Could the language here be figurative? Is there anything in the context that suggests that John is here using a figurative

11. "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand."

12. Op. cit., p. 548.

13. Op. cit., p. 37.

expression? Well, the language is not poetic, as in many places in Revelation. Nor is John here seeing a vision. Nothing here seems to be metaphorical. In fact, these sentences are some of the most simple and straightforward declarations in the entire book of Revelation. Why, then, should we understand John's language as an abstract statement about "nearness from the standpoint of prophetic revelation," or talk about "relative nearness"?

To be certain we are not missing any hint that the language is figurative, let's consider the meaning of the expression "the time is at hand" more carefully. The Greek word translated "at hand" ($\epsilon\gamma\gamma\upsilon\varsigma$) refers to nearness, either spacial or temporal, and is used quite a few times in the New Testament. Paul, for example, uses the word to speak of physical nearness in a figurative sense when he writes of the Gentiles: "But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ."

But, of course, the interesting uses are those that refer to temporal nearness. In the synoptic Gospels we have the record of Jesus teaching His disciples the parable of the fig tree: "Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh [$\epsilon\gamma\gamma\upsilon\varsigma$]: So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near [$\epsilon\gamma\gamma\upsilon\varsigma$], even at the doors." (Mt. 24:32; cf. Mk. 13:28-29; Lk. 21:30-31). Also, Matthew tells us that when it was time to prepare the last supper, Jesus sent one of His disciples into the city saying, "My time is at hand" (Mt. 26:18). Finally, John uses the word $\epsilon\gamma\gamma\upsilon\varsigma$ often, speaking of feasts being "at hand" (cf. Jn. 2:13; 6:4; 7:2; 11:55). What is apparent from these verses is that every expressly temporal use of the word indisputably refers to something that is very near in time, "even at the doors". There does not seem to be enough linguistic latitude for an interpretation of the word $\epsilon\gamma\gamma\upsilon\varsigma$ as "relative nearness" that may be 2,000 years from the initial point in time.

The more that we consider the details, the less likely we must consider the kind of interpretation suggested by Alford, Walvoord, and futurists in general. If John said the "things" he is writing about were to take place — in fact, "must" take place "shortly" — a 2,000-year gap between John's prophecy and the fulfillment of those words appears to stretch the "literal" language more than it can bear. We also have to ask whether John would have had a reason to speak of the time of fulfillment in the

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language of immediacy if he meant something else? Or is it more reasonable to assume that a theological bias influenced Alford's and Walvoord's interpretation at this point?

John's Conclusion

The beginning of the book of Revelation, then, rather strongly implies that the things which this book predicts are to occur soon after the book is written. But it is not just the beginning of the book which gives us this impression, for John uses the same expression "for the time is at hand"¹⁴ on one other occasion, at the conclusion of Revelation:

And he saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand. (Rv. 22:10)

Here we confront an additional matter to consider. John is referring to the book of Daniel, as all readers of the Bible can recognize: "But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased. . . . And he said, Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end" (Dn. 12:4, 9). Obviously, John alludes to Daniel for the sake of contrast. Whereas Daniel's book is to be sealed because the time of fulfillment is remote, John's book must *not* be sealed, because the time of its fulfillment is *near*.

How does Walvoord, whose commentary on Daniel refers to Daniel as the "Key to Prophetic Revelation,"¹⁵ relate these verses from Daniel and Revelation? He doesn't. For some reason, Walvoord does not take the key in hand. He comments:

John is especially commanded not to seal the sayings of the prophecy because the time (Gr., *kairos*), or proper season, is at hand (Gr., *eggys*), or near. The time period in which the tremendous consummation of the ages is to take place, according to

14. The Greek is slightly different, though synonymous: "ο γὰρ καιρὸς ἐγγύς" (Rev. 1:3); and "ο καιρὸς γὰρ ἐγγύς ἐστιν" (22:10).

15. *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971).

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John's instruction, is near. The indeterminate period assigned to the church is the last dispensation before end time events and, in John's day as in ours, the end is always impending because of the imminent return of Christ at the rapture with the ordered sequence of events to follow.¹⁶

Alford notes the passage in Daniel 12:10 as well as 8:26 "wherefore shut thou up the vision; for it shall be for many days."¹⁷ But he does not comment on what this means for the book of Revelation, nor does he relate Revelation 22:10 with 1:3. Other premillennialists either do not note the allusion to Daniel,¹⁸ or, even when they do note it, they offer an interpretation similar to Walvoord's above.¹⁹ Even Mounce, who notes the reference to Daniel and the difficulty implied by a straightforward interpretation — "postponed consummation" — concludes: "Thus the time has always been at hand. The tension is endemic to that span of redemptive history lying between the cross and the parousia."²⁰

The Daniel Connection

The allusion to Daniel in the conclusion of Revelation may be much more important than the futurists acknowledge. G. K. Beale suggests that the book of Daniel really is, as Walvoord implies, the key to understanding the book of Revelation.²¹ He points out that not only is Revelation 22:10 alluding to Daniel, as we pointed out above, but even Revelation 1:1 points back to the LXX translation of Daniel 2:28. The parallel can be seen clearly when the two verses are set side by side:

16. Op. cit., p. 334.

17. Op. cit., p. 747.

18. Consider, for example, J. B. Smith and Herman Hoyt. Smith, op. cit. Hoyt, *An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Winona Lake, IN: Brethren Missionary Herald Company, 1966).

19. See, for example, Gary Cohen and Salem Kirban, *Revelation Visualized* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972).

20. Mounce, Op. cit., p. 392.

21. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* in I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner ed., *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). The relationship between Daniel and Revelation has been the subject of special research by Beale.

Dn. 2:28

ἐδήλωσε . . . ἀ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐπ'
ἐσχάτων τῶν ἡμερῶν ("he showed . . . what things must take place in the latter days")

Rv. 1:1

δεῖξαι τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ ἀ δεῖ
γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει ("to show . . . what things must take place quickly")

According to Beale, the verbs translated “show” are “semantic equivalents,” both used to describe the “role of the prophets in revealing what God has ‘shown’ them.” The important matter to note is the change from the expression “in the latter days” to “quickly,” which “appears to indicate that fulfillment has begun (that it is being fulfilled) or will begin in the near future. Simply put, John understands Daniel’s reference to a distant time as referring to his own era and he updates the text accordingly. What Daniel expected to occur in the distant ‘latter days’ — the defeat of cosmic evil and the ushering in of the divine kingdom — John expects to begin ‘quickly,’ in his own generation, if it has not already begun to happen.”²²

Beale sees Revelation 1:3 as continuing the emphasis on near fulfillment: “This may be taken as an exaggerated expression of immanence: the time is not simply coming soon, but is actually *here*.” Beale labels the expression “the time is near” a “fulfillment formula” and refers to the parallel in Mark 1:15. His conclusion is: “Given these strong textual and thematic parallels between Rev. 1:1, 3 and Daniel, the very least that can be said is that the wording of these texts refers to the immediate future.”²³

Concerning the allusion to Daniel in Revelation 22:10, Beale notes that the “sealing of Daniel’s book meant that its prophecies would be neither fully understood nor fulfilled until the end” but that when John is told not to seal the book, it means that the things which “Daniel prophesied can now be understood because the prophecies have begun to be fulfilled and the latter days have begun.”²⁴

22. Ibid., p. 153.

23. Ibid., p. 154.

24. Ibid., p. 1130.

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This is the obvious reading of Revelation 22:10, the most natural interpretation of the allusion to Daniel, and, together with the obvious and literal reading of Revelation 1:1-3 and the most natural interpretation of its allusion to Daniel, we can only conclude that the introduction and conclusion of the book of Revelation lucidly announce that John's prophecy concerns events that are to transpire in his days, not in the distant future. A literal interpretation of the verses in Revelation that point clearly to the time that the prophesied events are to be fulfilled — verses that are written in the plainest language in the entire book — demands that we understand the figurative language of Revelation's visions to be teaching us the theological meaning of events that took place in John's time rather than offering photographic descriptions of cosmic judgments still future.

The Style of Revelation

But this begs the question: Why did John write a book filled with symbols like dragons, beasts, a woman clothed with the sun, and monster-like locusts in order to teach the theological meaning of events in his day? If he was trying to predict events in the near future, such as the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple system, for example, why didn't he just declare: "Jerusalem and its apostate temple worship are going to be judged by God!"? Why use cosmic imagery about the sun, moon, and stars to indicate an earthly event? Why talk about a new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, if the concern was the history of the world in the first century?

This whole line of questioning, though it is probably par for the course in our day, betrays a deep ignorance of the Bible, especially of the Old Testament prophets, upon whose writings John was dependent. The problem is that John and the prophets had an entirely different notion of the cosmos from modern men. If we are going to understand John, we are going to have to read him in terms of the Biblical worldview, not a modern, and especially not a "scientific" worldview. John was, for example, quite serious when he wrote: "And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind." But he would not have considered as serious an exegesis of these words that spoke of literal heavenly fireballs crashing into our planet. Stars falling from the sky and other such cosmic

language is part of the Biblical language of judgment, language which is grounded in the symbolism of creation and the history of God's covenantal judgment. It has nothing to do with literal stars falling out of the sky onto our little planet.

To get a better understanding of John's language, consider the very first great covenantal judgment, Noah's flood. Here God's judgment against the sins of men was manifested in an extreme, obvious, and "cosmic" manner. God put an end to the covenantal world-order that He had originally created. The flood was a de-creation of the world, bringing everything back to the situation of Genesis 1:2 "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep." There was no more land and sea, just the vast deep. Of course, no more Garden of Eden. No human race, except those in the ark. No cities. God brought an end to the original covenant era with a global catastrophe — a catastrophe that serves as a foretaste of final judgement as well as a paradigm for covenantal judgment in history.

But the paradigm does not work "literally," for God had promised that no other judgment in history would be a literal global catastrophe like the flood (Gen. 9:11). The paradigm works symbolically. That is, every other great covenantal judgment is described in the language of de-creation and cosmic catastrophe because, like the judgment of the flood, they all bring a particular "cosmic order" to an end. Every time God brings final judgment to a particular people or in a particular covenantal era — such as the judgment on the kingdoms of Israel and Judah — it is the "end of the world" for that nation, or the end of that particular "cosmic order." Just like the flood ended a covenantal era that began with Adam and brought in a new covenantal era with a new covenantal head, a Second Adam, so every other final covenantal judgment ends one world and brings in another, although new covenant eras that began with Abraham, Moses, David, and Ezra were not really *new* in the full sense of the word. The various covenantal eras in the Old Covenant were all "in Adam," that is, extensions of the original covenant with Adam and a continuation of the covenant given to mankind through him.

Even so, at the end of each of these covenantal eras, there is a catastrophic covenantal judgment that represents the "end of the world." The clearest examples of this come from the prophetic judgments against the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and the nations around them. Consider, for example, the language of Jeremiah when he

prophesies the coming judgment of God against Israel:

My bowels, my bowels! I am pained at my very heart; my heart maketh a noise in me; I cannot hold my peace, because thou hast heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war. Destruction upon destruction is cried; for the whole land is spoiled: suddenly are my tents spoiled, and my curtains in a moment. How long shall I see the standard, and hear the sound of the trumpet? For my people is foolish, they have not known me; they are sottish children, and they have none understanding: they are wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge. *I beheld the earth, and, lo, it was without form, and void; and the heavens, and they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and, lo, they trembled, and all the hills moved lightly. I beheld, and, lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens were fled. I beheld, and, lo, the fruitful place was a wilderness, and all the cities thereof were broken down at the presence of the LORD, and by his fierce anger.* For thus hath the LORD said, The whole land shall be desolate; yet will I not make a full end. *For this shall the earth mourn, and the heavens above be black: because I have spoken it, I have purposed it, and will not repent, neither will I turn back from it.* The whole city shall flee for the noise of the horsemen and bowmen; they shall go into thickets, and climb up upon the rocks: every city shall be forsaken, and not a man dwell therein. And when thou art spoiled, what wilt thou do? Though thou clothest thyself with crimson, though thou deckest thee with ornaments of gold, though thou rentest thy face with painting, in vain shalt thou make thyself fair; thy lovers will despise thee, they will seek thy life. For I have heard a voice as of a woman in travail, and the anguish as of her that bringeth forth her first child, the voice of the daughter of Zion, that bewaileth herself, that spreadeth her hands, saying, Woe is me now! for my soul is wearied because of murderers. (Jer. 4:19-31)²⁵

25. The language found here in Jeremiah is typical of the prophets. In Ezekiel, God's prophesied

Here Jeremiah speaks of the coming destruction on Jerusalem in the language of cosmic catastrophe because God is about to bring final covenantal judgment on Judah, a judgment that is analogous to the judgment which he brought upon the world through the Noahic deluge. The covenant structure of the world is about to suffer cataclysmic change. The people of God will be removed from their place as the guardians of God's temple. But only, of course, after the temple itself is left desolate, as Ezekiel shows (Eze. 8-11). Then the land will be defiled by invading armies (vs. 20). The Eden of Jeremiah's day (cf. vs. 26) is about to be overwhelmed in a deluge and the world will be returned to the condition of Genesis 1:2, without form and void (vs. 23), so that God can make a new start.

No evangelical commentator doubts that Jeremiah here uses this extreme language — language that could be used to describe the literal end of the universe — to teach the theological significance of God's covenant judgment against His people. The metaphor-system of covenantal judgment naturally employs allusions to previous covenantal judgments, especially the first great world transforming judgment of the Flood, to express the truth that God is removing Judah as His priest, leaving the temple, and annulling His covenant with His people, divorcing them for their unfaithfulness.

A similar example is provided by the book of Daniel. Daniel speaks of a little horn which "waxed exceeding great, even to the host of heaven" (8:10a), language that could quite well refer to some sort of supernatural monster. Furthermore, Daniel tells us that this little horn will "cast down some of the host and of the stars to the ground" (8:10b). And, as if that were not enough, he will stamp upon the stars! Now, a literal interpretation of this would require a new physics, but dispensationalist John F. Walvoord does not interpret this "literally." According to Walvoord, this was all fulfilled in the history of Syria, especially through Antiochus Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.):

judgment against Egypt includes similar language. Ezekiel says that Pharaoh is like a lion or a dragon in the sea (33:2), but God will feed him to the beasts of the earth (vs. 4ff.). When God judges Pharaoh, the heavens will be covered and the sun, moon, and stars darkened (vs. 7-8). Isaiah, too, uses language of stars and sun giving no light when he speaks of judgment against Babylon (Isa. 13:9-11) and of the whole host of heaven being dissolved in the judgment of God against Edom (Isa. 34:1-5). It is only because we are not familiar enough with the prophets and the symbolism of covenantal judgment that it occurs to us to take this kind of language "literally" when we read it in Revelation.

As a result of his military conquests, the little horn, representing Antiochus Epiphanes, is said to grow great ‘even to the host of heaven.’ He is pictured as casting some of the host and of the stars to the ground and stamping upon them. This difficult prophecy has aroused many technical discussions as that of Montgomery which extends over several pages. If the mythological explanations such as identifying stars with heathen gods or the seven planets is discarded and this is considered genuine prophecy, probably the best explanations is that this prophecy relates to the persecution and destruction of the people of God with its defiance of the angelic hosts who are their protectors, including the power of God Himself.²⁶

Walvoord goes on to quote with approval Leupold’s interpretation of the stars as God’s people. Which is to say, that even dispensationalists recognize that the language of cosmic judgment may be used to describe covenantal judgment in history. But what Walvoord recognizes here as cosmic symbolism used to describe regular historical events is the typical language of what is commonly called “apocalyptic” literature. As N. T. Wright points out:

It follows from all this that there is no justification for seeing ‘apocalyptic’ as necessarily speaking of the ‘end of the world’ in a literally cosmic sense. This modern idea has regularly been fuelled by the belief that ‘apocalyptic’ is ‘dualistic,’ in a way which we have now seen to be unfounded. The great bulk of apocalyptic writing does not suggest that the space-time universe is evil, and does not look for it to come to an end. An end to the present world order, yes: only such language, as Jeremiah found, could do justice to the

26. Walvoord, *Daniel*, p. 185. Cf. also, dispensationalist commentator Leon Wood, who simply writes: “The host of heaven, or stars, refers to the people of God (cf. 12:3; Gen. 15:5; 22:17; Ex. 12:41), and the symbolism is that Antiochus would oppress God’s people, the Jews, in their land (cf. v. 24).” *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), p. 213.

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terrible events of his day. The end of the space-time world, no. The implicit argument that has dominated scholarship over this last century has claimed that (a) the hugely figurative language about cosmic catastrophe must be interpreted literally, and (b) the clear dualities inherent in apocalyptic indicate a radical dualism which sought the destruction of the present world altogether. Instead of this, we must insist on a reading which does justice to the literary nature of the works in question; which sets them firmly in their historical context, in which Jews of most shades of opinion looked for their god to act within continuing history; and which grasps the fundamental Jewish worldview and theology, seeing the present world as the normal and regular sphere of divine actions, whether hidden or revealed. Literature, history and theology combine to suggest strongly that we must read most apocalyptic literature, both Jewish and Christian, as a complex metaphor-system which invests space-time reality with its full, that is, its theological, significance.²⁷

Interpretation that is truly grammatical and historical, then, must take into account the Biblical metaphor-system of covenantal judgment. Indeed, most commentators, including dispensationalists, already recognize this when they interpret Old Testament prophecy. Thus, most commentators can agree when they interpret a prophecy like Jeremiah 4. We understand that from the perspective of God's covenant, nothing in this world was more important than the worship system of the temple, the land of the Israel, and the covenant people themselves. The greatness of Babylon and the power of Egypt may have been politically more significant, but they were not covenantally more important. However, when, in the days of Jeremiah, the people forsook God's law, He "divorced" His wife, desolating the temple and ruining the land. This meant the end of the covenantal world of the kingdom era that began with David and Solomon. The destruction of that world order was expressed in the language of a covenantal metaphor-system that had its roots in

27. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 298-99.

the symbolism of the Garden of Eden and the judgment of the Noahic deluge because the theological meaning of God's judgment on the kingdoms of Israel and Judah was essentially the same as the meaning of the deluge.

The purpose of using symbolic language was to draw attention to this theological meaning so that the people of Jeremiah's day could understand what really happened. They were not wrestling with a merely political problem, but with the Creator God who brings covenantal judgment in history on those who rebel against Him. The symbolic language was therefore more "real" than a newspaper-type description of the battles fought by Nebuchadnezzar against Judah. Symbolism created an encounter between the Jews and Noah's God.

Of all the covenant judgments in the world, the judgments surrounding the end of the old covenant era in Adam and the bringing in of a totally new covenant were the most significant. In Jesus, the world is renewed in a way that it could not have been renewed after the Flood. Jesus cleansed the world more wholly than the waters of the deluge, so that He brought about the end of the distinction between clean and unclean. He brought into being a new race of men to be God's people, and He opened the way to an everlasting temple that could never be defiled. When He rose from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God, He became King of kings and Lord of lords. A wholly new covenant era began that cannot be defiled and ruined by man's sin because the Last Adam has won the victory over sin and death.

The forty years from the time of Jesus' death and resurrection to the destruction of the temple system were a transitional period, like the wilderness wandering of Israel, during which the worship system of the temple, an old covenant system, was still legitimate, as can be seen from the fact that Paul and the apostles honored it (Ac. 2:46; 3:1 ff.; 5:21, 42; 21:26; 25:8). But the destruction of that temple system, which our Lord prophesied, was one of the most important aspects of the founding of a new covenant era, for the old must be brought into final judgment before the new is fully established. The end of the Adamic covenant and the Adamic world — the real end and not a mere surface change like the Noahic deluge — meant a new priesthood, a new law, and a new temple.

John's concern, thus, is with the destruction of the old Jerusalem and its temple system so that the era of the New Jerusalem and its temple system can be fully brought

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in. The transitional era referred to in the New Testament as the “last days” (Ac. 2:17; 2 Tm. 3:1; Hb. 1:2; Jms. 5:3; 2 Pt. 3:3) was about to end and God’s final judgment on the apostate people was coming. The Church, composed of Jews and Gentiles who had all, by baptism, been adopted into the family of Abraham (cf. Gal. 3), clearly became the new people of God. Christians themselves were the new temple and the new priesthood also. The boundaries of the land of promise were extended to the whole world and a new Joshua would lead in the conquest (cf. Mt. 28:18-20). John expresses all of this in the language of the Bible and through its covenantal metaphor-system because this is the most appropriate language to express the deep theological significance of events whose outward appearance could not have shown their real meaning in the plan and program of God.

John himself tells us that he is speaking in signs in the very first verse of his book: “and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John.” The word translated “signify” “can be interpreted as ‘sign-i-fy,’ or to convey truth by signs and symbols. Such an interpretation fits Revelation aptly since it is largely written in ‘signs.’”²⁸ John, in other words, writes his entire prophecy in metaphorical language that can *reveal* the true nature of the events that are about to take place shortly, events that will fulfill the prophecy of Jesus, bringing about the final end of the old covenant and clear evidence that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God as Lord of the new covenant.

Conclusion

We have seen that a literal translation of the first verses of Revelation informs us that the book is a prophecy of events that took place soon after the book was written, events that John described in figurative language. We have also seen that the figurative language of Revelation reveals the real meaning of the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 in a way that straightforward prose could not. A mere prophecy of the events in the language of journalistic reporting would have concealed what was really happening, even if the report had been accurate. The twentieth century reader, in order to interpret Revelation grammatically and

28. Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 43.

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historically, must consider the Biblical language of covenantal judgment and the literary forms used by the prophets of God, whose language John borrows. When we take into account the Biblical forms of prophetic curse, it becomes clear that John's book concerns events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem. That does not make His book irrelevant to us. On the contrary, it is just as relevant as other New Testament books that speak about matters in the first century, like the books to the Corinthians, Colossians, Thessalonians, and others, which discuss problems in ancient churches. Furthermore, the fact that the language is symbolic means that the application to our own day is more clear, since we can derive principles of covenantal judgment from the fulfilled prophecy of Revelation just as we can from Isaiah or Jeremiah.

In John's day, the quickness of Christ's coming to judge Jerusalem, emphasized so frequently (in addition to the passages above, see: Rv. 22:7, 12, 20), meant that the Church must prepare herself. The judgment of apostate Jerusalem would save the Church from the main source of persecution and thus be a comfort (Rv. 3:11), but it was also a warning. If Jesus was going to judge apostate Jews, He would also judge apostate Christians (Rv. 2:5, 16). This is the message for us today. Christ rules the world by His covenant. Those who represent Him righteously will bear fruit abundantly (Jn. 15:1-8). But apostates will not prosper. He has demonstrated His power and wrath against sinners in the past, and He continues to do so today.

Appendix Four

A TEST CASE: REVELATION 19:11-16

The book of Revelation ends with seven visions, each beginning with the words “and I saw.”¹ The first of these visions, recorded in Revelation 19:11-16, is a classic proof text for premillennialism and therefore a good passage with which to test postmillennial exegesis. Can postmillennialism deal faithfully with what seems to many modern readers to be an unequivocally premillennial passage of Scripture?

And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and He that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and He had a name written, that no man knew, but He Himself. And He was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies in heaven followed Him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of His mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it He should smite the nations: and He shall rule them with a rod of iron: and He treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And He hath on His vesture and on His thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.

1. These words are repeated in Revelation 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 11; 21:1.

Literal Interpretation?

According to the premillennial commentator John F. Walvoord, "This passage contains one of the most graphic pictures of the second coming of Christ to be found anywhere in Scripture."² He further explains:

As is made clear in these prophecies Zech. 14:3-4; Mt. 24:27-31; etc., the second coming of Christ will be a glorious event which all the world will behold, both believers and unbelievers. It is compared to lightning that shines from the east to the west, in other words, illuminating the whole heaven. The second coming will be preceded by the sun being darkened and the moon not giving her light, stars falling from heaven, and other phenomena not only mentioned in Matthew 24 but vividly revealed in the Revelation. The climax to all these events will be the return of Christ himself in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory and accompanied by the saints. The final revelation of this event is found in Revelation 19.³

Either Walvoord has some very strange, though not necessarily unpopular, ideas about the second coming of Christ or he is speaking of Biblical symbols as if they were literal, perhaps for the sake of rhetorical effect. I suspect that what has happened is that he has made the mistake of not carefully distinguishing the content of John's vision from the historical referent. This is apparent when he speaks of Revelation 19:11-16 as a "graphic picture" of the second coming, when in fact it is the record of a *vision*.

This error is endemic to Walvoord's dispensational premillennialism. The quote above refers, for example, to stars falling. Revelation 6:13, one of the passages Walvoord has in mind, is actually more specific: "the stars of the sky fell to the earth." Walvoord comments on the paragraph that includes this remarkable prophecy,

2. *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973), p. 274.

3. Ibid. pp. 275-76. For a superb, book-length discussion of Matthew 24 that demonstrates the superiority of postmillennial exegesis in detail, see Gary Demar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Atlanta: American Vision, Inc., 1994).

"Students of Revelation have had difficulty interpreting this passage and the tendency has been to regard these judgments as symbolic rather than real.⁴ The motive behind this interpretation has been a reluctance to accept a literal interpretation of these judgments at this time . . ."⁵ He goes on to argue that there are "a number of reasons for preferring to take this passage in its literal meaning."⁶ He even quotes E. W. Bullinger's assertion that, "It is impossible for us to take this as symbolical; or as other than what it literally says. The difficulties of the symbolical interpretation are insuperable, while no difficulties whatever attend the literal interpretation."⁷

Apart from the fact that the Bible *never* uses the language of stars falling from the sky as *literal* language — the most important difficulty for the literal interpretation — there is the problem of John's actual words, "the stars of the sky fell to the earth." Just how many "stars," most of which are larger than the sun, does Walvoord think can fall to the earth without doing more damage than the poor planet can sustain? Interestingly, Walvoord's literal interpretation of this passage does not deal with the difficult phrase "fell to the earth," except in the most general terms like "disturbances in the heavens." Unfortunately for Walvoord's literalism, John's language is clear and unmistakable. John says that "stars" — no escape can be found in hermeneutical gymnastics with the original Greek — "fell to the earth" — again, the Greek is clear and accurately translated.

Anyone treating this language seriously must be reluctant to accept a literal interpretation not because they see the "judgments as symbolic," nor simply because they recognize that John's language cannot make any literal sense. We need to recognize that John is using common Biblical figurative language. If we were accustomed to the Biblical creationist worldview, we would note that Biblical writers

4. Note here the contrast between the "symbolic" and the "real." If Walvoord considers these notions antithetical, how will he deal with passages that he himself must regard as symbolic? Is the "body of Christ" unreal because the language is symbolical? Such a notion would never occur to Walvoord. The problem with his comments on the book of Revelation is that he has never carefully thought through the Bible's use of symbolic language.

5. *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 136.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., p. 137.

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frequently speak of stars as figures of men⁸ (Gen. 37:9; Num. 24:17; Dan. 8:10; 12:3; Jude 1:13; Rev. 1:16; etc.; cf. Jdg. 5:20; Job. 37:8) and the language of stars falling is used of judgment (cf. Ez. 32:7). It is not, furthermore, the judgment that is symbolic. The judgment is real. It is the language about judgment that is symbolic. And one purpose of that symbolism is to link the judgment spoken of in Revelation 6:13 with other divine judgments, especially the final judgment, for all judgments in history are partial downpayments upon the final judgment. Walvoord's literalism not only mistakes the theological truth of John's language, it turns John into a scientifically confused prophet predicting ridiculous future events.

Returning to Revelation 19, it is all the more remarkable to observe that although for Walvoord the falling of stars to the earth is literal language, Jesus riding on a white horse is a symbol. He says that John is referring to the "symbolism of a rider on a white horse drawn from the custom of conquerors riding on a white horse as a sign of victory in triumph."⁹ Symbolism? Hasn't Walvoord seen Salem Kirban's picture of Jesus on the white horse in *Revelation Visualized*?¹⁰ Why is it more difficult to imagine Jesus riding a white horse from heaven than to imagine a multitude of giant fire-balls, each larger than the sun, falling to planet earth? Why should the "graphic picture" of Christ's second coming be couched in figurative language?¹¹

Even if Walvoord's literalism could make room for the horse, other elements of this passage cause problems. Some Greek texts do not include the important — for the literalist interpretation — word "as" before the description of Jesus' eyes as a "flame of fire." John says that there are "many crowns" on Jesus' head. His robe is dipped in blood. And He has a sharp sword coming out of His mouth. To be brief, a literal interpretation of this passage would be grotesque beyond imagination. In the final

8. Genesis 15:5; 22:17; and 26:4 promise that Abraham's seed will be as numerous as the stars of heaven. This is not using the stars as symbols, but it sets the background for passages that do use the stars as symbols for Israel. (cf. also Ex. 32:13; Dt. 1:10; 10:22; 28:62; 1 Chr. 27:23; Neh. 9:23;)

9. *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 276.

10. Gary G. Cohen and Salem Kirban, *Revelation Visualized* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), p. 393.

11. Not all dispensationalists take the language as figurative. Salem Kirban comments, "Soon a majestic figure on a white horse is apparent . . . and behind him a vast and numberless throng all on white horses. . . . Imagine the shock as people of earth look up and see millions upon millions of Christians converging on them from the sky, all riding on white horses." Salem Kirban and Gary Cohen, *Revelation Visualized* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), p. 393.

analysis the most enthusiastic literalist is forced to regard the language here as at least partially figurative.

But, the literal interpreter will insist, even if the language is figurative, it is speaking about the literal coming of Christ. This is simply not true. Once again, it is important to consider the actual words of the text. There is no reference to Jesus' coming to the earth or to a "parousia." The idea of the second coming is read into the passage on the basis of the theological presuppositions of the interpreter. What the text actually says is that Jesus will "judge and make war." John speaks of Jesus riding a white horse and leading a heavenly army to subdue the nations and bring them into submission to Him. This is the unmistakable "literal" content of the symbolic language. Whether Jesus conquers the nations by physical violence at the time of His second coming or by the Gospel prior to His second coming is a question that is decided by other passages of Scripture. Neither the premillennialist nor the postmillennialist can find a simple statement of his eschatology here.

Biblical Interpretation

The vision that John sees employs symbols. To understand the symbolic level of communication, we have to ask how the symbols in Revelation 19:11-16 are used in Scripture as a whole, for the Bible does contain its own metaphor system, its own system of symbolic language. Close attention to the language of the text and the use of similar expressions in other passages of Scripture suggests that John is using common Biblical figures to prophesy not the second coming of Christ, but the conquest of the nations by the Gospel. It is true that because John is speaking of covenantal conquest, the language is similar to the kind of expressions we might expect in a prophecy of the final judgment of the nations at Christ's coming. But John's language is specific enough for important distinctions to be clearly made.

There is no Biblical reason for asserting that John could not be referring to the present period of "discipling the nations" by the Gospel. The language itself is appropriate. We must remember, too, that any interpretation of Revelation 19 confronts the fact that John is using figurative language. What does his language

symbolize? Three considerations suggest that John is teaching the covenantal spread of the Gospel: 1) the New Testament teaching about the conquest of the nations; 2) the figurative use of martial symbolism; 3) a comparison of John's words with the use of the same or similar expressions in other Scriptures.

Every Enemy Subdued

The New Testament teaches in no uncertain terms that Jesus is now, during the present age of the Gospel, subduing every enemy. He has been crowned King of kings and Lord of lords at His ascension to the right hand of God (Acts 2:34ff; 5:31; Eph. 1:18ff.; Heb. 1:3; 10:12; etc.). All authority in heaven and on earth is already His (Mt. 28:18). Furthermore, the clearest passage in the Bible on the time of the second coming of Christ includes the declaration that Jesus, who is now reigning over God's creation (Mt. 28:18), "must reign, till he hath put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Cor. 15:25). As we pointed out in a previous essay, Paul is quoting Psalm 110:1, the Psalm of the Messiah as Melchizedekian King-Priest, frequently quoted in the New Testament. Jesus' reign, including the defeat of all enemies, is the logical application of his cross: "but he, when he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; henceforth expecting till his enemies be made the footstool of his feet" (Heb. 10:12-13). It should not be necessary to point out that "enemy" is the vocabulary of martial symbolism.

It may be necessary, however, to remind ourselves that subduing the enemy is typical language of covenantal blessing for God's people. Beginning with Abraham's defeat of Chedorlaomer (Gen. 14:13ff.; cf. esp. vs. 20), God's defeating of Israel's enemies is a repeated feature of the covenantal blessing. After offering up Isaac, Abraham is promised: "thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies" (Gn. 22:17). Rebekah receives the same blessing when she goes to marry Isaac (Gn. 24:60). Judah, whose descendants become the leading tribe of Israel, is given the same blessing, too (Gn. 49:8). In short, the Old Testament promise of covenantal blessing included as an essential aspect the curse on those who cursed Abraham (Gn. 12:3), which is elaborated in many passages as a promise that God will defeat Israel's enemies (cf. Ex. 15:6; 23:22; Lv. 26:7-8; Num. 10:9, 35; Dt. 20:3-4; 23:14; 28:7; etc.).¹² It is natural, then, that John

seeing in a vision the Messiah's covenantal victory should picture it in terms of warfare.

Martial Symbolism

No one disputes the fact that the Abrahamic covenant is the background for the New Testament Gospel (Gal. 3:6ff.). This means that the martial language of the Abrahamic promise is brought into the New Testament also. Most importantly, it is found frequently associated with the preaching and spread of the Gospel. This may seem unusual, but only to those who have forgotten the typological meaning of the conquest of Canaan. In the conquest God sent His people to conquer the land of Canaan by an exceptional form of warfare (cf. Dt. 20:1-20, esp. vs. 16-18) as an application of the curse of the Abrahamic covenant — “I will . . . curse him that curseth thee” (Gen. 12:3b). The land promised to Abraham and conquered by war was a symbol of the world promised to Christ and conquered by the Gospel. Paul alludes to the symbolism of Canaan representing the world when he says that Abraham is the covenantal “heir of the world” (Rom. 4:13). Implied in the original promise that Abraham would be the source of blessing for the world (Gen. 12:3c) was the fuller statement of the promise in Genesis 22:17-18 in which the conquest of enemies and the blessing of the world are inseparably yoked: “in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.”

Both the covenantal conquest of Canaan by military forces under Joshua and the covenantal conquest of the world through covenantal preaching under Joshua-Jesus are a fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise. This leads to the use of martial language to describe the conquest of the world by the Gospel, the fulfillment of the Canaan-conquest typology.

1. Satan and the World

Of the several basic categories of martial symbolism, the most well recognized is

12. When Israel breaks the covenant, she will be defeated by her enemies as part of God's curse and discipline for her (Lv. 26:16ff.; Dt. 28:25ff.).

that which speaks of Satan as the enemy and views Christians as fighting a spiritual warfare against him. The kingdom parables of Jesus, for example, frequently draw on this symbol (Mt. 13:25, 28, 39). Also, when the seventy returned from their Gospel preaching tour, Jesus said, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you” (Lk. 10:8-9). And Paul tells us that the cross “disarmed” the demonic host so that Jesus gained a public triumph over them (Col. 2:15). These are only a few of the passages which refer to the idea of warfare against Satan, a topic which pervades Scripture from Genesis 3:15 onwards.

Of course, the defeat of the Satanic enemy must include the defeat of his earthly kingdom and forces. This includes false teachers in particular who are enemies of the kingdom of God and servants of the devil who do all within their power to destroy Christ’s kingdom (Jhn. 8:44; Acts 13:9-10; 2 Cor. 11:13ff.; Phil. 3:18). It also includes, more broadly, all of those who do not believe in the true God, the citizens of Satan’s kingdom, for whoever “wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jms. 4:4b; cf. Col. 1:13, 21). All of these earthly enemies must be subdued by Christ before He returns (1 Cor. 15:25-26; Acts 2:35; Heb. 1:13; 10:13).

2. Paul’s Ministry

Within the symbolic framework of Canaan-like world conquest, Paul regarded his own preaching ministry as a form of special warfare. He called his ministry a fight and urged young Timothy to fight with him (2 Tim. 4:7; 1 Cor. 9:26; 1 Tim. 6:12). Paul waged war with God-given weapons: “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds)” (2 Cor. 10:3-4). Although he felt himself overwhelmed by the implications of this truth, he was absolutely certain that victory belonged to the saints of God: “Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Cor. 2:14-16).

The weapons Paul mentioned above are detailed in his description of the

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Christian warrior (Eph. 6:11ff.), prominent among which is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17). In addition to the sword of the Spirit, Christians are to be armed with “the breastplate of righteousness,” “the shield of faith,” and “the helmet of salvation” (Eph. 6:14, 16, 17; cf. 1 Thes. 5:8), no doubt the same weapons with which Paul fought.

In the context of Canaan-conquest typology, it is appropriate that both Paul and John emphasize the fact that Christians are “more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Rom. 8:37), “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world — our faith” (1 Jn. 5:4). Because Christ Himself vanquished the world by His cross (Jn. 16:33), we, too, have the victory over Satan (1 Jn. 2:13, 14; 4:4) and the world (1 Jn. 5:4, 5). All true Christians are overcomers, for we read that to the overcomer, the victor, is promised the tree of life (Rev. 2:7), freedom from the second death (Rev. 2:11), the hidden manna (Rev. 2:17), power over the nations (Rev. 2:26), and white garments (Rev. 3:5). It is also promised that he will become a pillar in the house of God (Rev. 3:12), sitting down on Jesus’ throne with Him (Rev. 3:21) and sharing in the inheritance of all things (Rev. 21:7).

3. The Great Commission

Finally, it should be noted that the Great Commission itself, though not specifically couched in the language of military symbolism, is nevertheless clearly a command to bring the entire world into submission to Christ: “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and disciple all nations” (Mt. 28:18-19a). To this command there is a promise attached. It is the same promise that was repeated twice to Israelite soldiers before going into battle:

When thou goest out to battle against thine enemies, and seest horses, and chariots, and a people more than thou, be not afraid of them: for the LORD thy God is with thee, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And it shall be, when ye are come nigh unto the battle, that the priest shall approach and speak unto the people, and shall say unto them, Hear, O Israel, ye approach this day unto battle against your enemies: let not your hearts faint, fear not, and do not tremble, neither be ye terrified because of

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them; for the LORD your God is he that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you. (Dt. 20:1-4)

This same promise was also repeated twice to Joshua in accordance with the Mosaic formula: “as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee” (Josh. 1:5); “be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest” (Josh. 1:9). Jesus’ promise to be with the Church includes a promise taken from what was originally part of the military laws of Israel, because the Church is called to covenantally conquer the world. This is the Biblical background for Revelation 19:11-16. Jesus as the New Covenant Joshua is riding a white horse leading the Church to victory through the preaching of the Gospel.

4. Jesus’ Teaching

Even the threats of judgment found in John’s vision find their place in the Gospel ministry. For example, Jesus was speaking about the effect of the spread of the Gospel when He said: “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword” (Mt. 10:34). He also commanded the evangelists to “shake off the dust” from their feet as a testimony against the cities which did not receive the Gospel; He added, “Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city” (Mk. 6:11; Mt. 10:14; Lk. 9:5). Paul and Barnabas followed Jesus’ directive when the Jews of Antioch in Pisidia “expelled them out of their coasts” (Acts 13:50-51). This symbolic act of covenantal judgment, an aspect of the Gospel ministry long forgotten, points to the Gospel as a “savor of death unto death” to those who rebel against it. The call to believe is a command from the living God. Those who refuse will be overthrown by God’s providential judgment.

Jesus Himself not only ended His ministry by hurling at Israel the most terrifying curse recorded in Scripture (Mt. 23:1-39) and prophesying the destruction of Israel for her sins (Mt. 24-25), He also specifically instructed the disciples in how to curse. Mark tells us that Jesus approached a fig tree that had leaves but no fruit “for it was not the season of figs” (Mk. 11:13b). We may be sure that Jesus knew the season of figs and that he was not going to find any on the tree. He chose the fig tree, a well-known symbol of

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Israel, in order to curse it. The tree withered away, surprising the disciples. Jesus then told them, "Have faith in God. For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith." (Mk. 11:22b-23). Jesus is obviously not speaking literally of mountains being cast into the sea. He is speaking of imprecatory prayer. His promise is that if the disciples curse kingdoms in sincere faith, God will hear their prayer and destroy them. Jesus adds teaching about forgiving our personal enemies so that no one will mistake prayers for personal vengeance with prayers for judgment on wicked nations (Mk. 11:25-26). Christians are expected to pray for the wrath of the Lamb against those nations that reject the truth and persecute God's people. But the curse is not necessarily final, as we learn from the Psalms:

O my God, make them like a wheel;
as the stubble before the wind.
As the fire burneth a wood,
and as the flame setteth the mountains on fire;
So persecute them with thy tempest,
and make them afraid with thy storm.
Fill their faces with shame;
that they may seek thy name, O LORD. (Ps. 83:13-16)

When we remember how Jesus cursed Israel and how He instructed the disciples to pray imprecatory prayers against the kingdoms that oppose the Gospel, it should not be regarded as unusual that even in this Gospel age we can speak of Him as treading "the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God" (Rev. 19:15b). It is essential to the Gospel message to warn men that nations which reject the Gospel face the wrath of the risen Christ.

Comparing Scripture with Scripture

In addition to the frequent use of martial symbolism for the Gospel ministry,

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certain details of the language here indicate that John is speaking of a conquest that is not literally military. First, Jesus is called “Faithful and True,” a common expression in Revelation. From the beginning John claims his book is a revelation of “Jesus Christ, the faithful witness” (1:5). Jesus identifies Himself to the Church of Laodicea as the Faithful and True Witness (3:14). He is also called the True One who has the key of David (3:7), and Holy and True (6:10). Jesus’ faithfulness and verity are emphasized as aspects of His work as a witness to God’s Truth. These are His qualities as God’s Son, through Whom God speaks the new-covenant revelation. Thus, shortly after the vision of Jesus on a white horse, John twice proclaims that the words of God are “faithful and true” (21:5; 22:6). The title John uses here alludes to Jesus’ work as the Prophet of God whose witness may not be refused (cf. Dt. 18:15ff.).

John tells us that Jesus “judges and wages war” in righteousness (19:11). The verb John employs is used infrequently in the New Testament — outside of Revelation only in James 4:2, and in the book of Revelation only in 2:16; 12:7; 13:4; 17:14 and 19:11. Including the passage in James, every one of these passages is best understood as speaking figuratively, beginning with Jesus’ threat to judge members of the church of Pergamum: ‘Repent therefore; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth’ (Rev. 2:16). Michael and the angels in heaven cannot be literally fighting with swords and spears against a literal dragon (12:7). The people who exclaim “Who is like the beast, and who is able to wage war with him?” (Rev. 13:4) may be thinking of literal war, but probably they mean “Who is able to withstand him?” Finally, apart from Revelation 19:11, the only other verse is one in which John speaks of those who will “wage war against the Lamb” (Rev. 17:14), which must be figurative since no one can ascend to heaven to attack Christ. My point is not that the Greek verb used here is a technical word only used in a figurative sense.¹³ My point is rather that the language of war can be and is frequently figurative, even in Revelation, significantly including the reference to Jesus’ covenantal judgment on the Church (Rev. 2:16).

Again, that the warfare in Revelation 19:11-16 should be understood as a metaphor for the Gospel going forth is indicated by the fact that Jesus’ name is called “The Word of God” (Rev. 19:13). Just as the name “Faithful and True” points to Jesus

13. The noun form of this Greek verb is often used for literal war (Mt. 24:6; Mk. 13:7; Lk. 14:31; 21:9; 1 Cor. 14:8; Heb. 11:34), but it may be used in a figurative sense also (Jms. 4:1; Rev. 12:7; 12:17; 19:19).

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as a witness, so, too, the name “word of God” refers to Jesus as the final and perfect revelation of God. In Revelation John repeatedly speaks of the word of God and associates it with the testimony of Jesus. He identifies himself as one “who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:2). John was on the island of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). John saw the souls of those who were slain “because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained” (6:9) and later sees the “souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God” (20:4).

The description of a sword coming out of Jesus’ mouth makes little sense as a picture of the second-coming judgment, nor would it fit in with other passages in Revelation. Revelation begins with a vision of the glory of the resurrected Christ as He stands amidst the lampstands, in other words, as Christ manifests Himself to His people. In this vision, too, Jesus is seen with a “sharp two-edged sword” coming out of His mouth. The symbolism here is not pointing to Jesus as One who “makes war” against the Church. What it means is clearly seen when John later reports Jesus’ words to the church in Pergamos: “Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth” (Rev. 2:16). This is a threat of covenantal judgment, not literal war.

Finally, there is the language of ruling the nations “with a rod of iron” (Rev. 19:15). This quotation from Psalm 2 speaks of Jesus’ covenantal dominion. This is also part of the Great Commission, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth,” and is a theme of the early chapters of Revelation. The glorious Christ of Revelation 1:12-16 appears to the churches in Revelation 2-3. Dominion over the nations is the repeated promise of the Head of the Church:

And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. (Rev. 2:26-27)

To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his

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throne. (Rev. 3:21)

Putting all of these expressions together in a simple phrase by phrase interpretation of John's vision, we come to something like the following:

And I saw heaven opened

John here sees heaven opened up not for Jesus to return, but so that he can see the following series of visions.

behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war

John sees Jesus in His capacity of Faithful and True Witness, the Word of God who will conquer the world by His truth.

His eyes were as a flame of fire

This is the same description that John uses to describe Jesus' presence in the Church (1:14). The King of kings is omniscient and holy as Ruler and Judge.

on his head were many crowns

Because He is King of kings, all the nations are actually under His authority, whether they acknowledge it or not.

he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself

He is inscrutable.

he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood

Although the Old Testament background for this passage refers to the blood of the nations (Is. 63:1-6), I think John used the same language to refer to the blood of the cross, for he constantly emphasizes Jesus as the Lamb whose blood redeems the world and

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the Lamb who judges the world (cf. Rev. 1:5; 5:6, 8, 9, 12; 6:1, 16; 7:9, 10, 14, 17; 12:11; 13:8; 14:1, 4, 10; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7, 9; 21:14, 22, 23; 22:1, 3). If it is the blood of the nations referred to, it reminds us that rejection of the Gospel brings judgment.

his name is called The Word of God

He wages war with His Word, not with raw power, through the preachers of the Gospel, not with angelic armies.

And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean

The Church is Christ's heavenly army, clothed in white linen because they are redeemed by His blood.

out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword

The third time in the context that John has emphasized Jesus' omnipotent Word.

with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God

He rules the nations by His word and His covenantal judgment is real. Nations that reject Him face His wrath.

And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS

He has been exalted to the right hand of God and given all authority. The Church must take that authority seriously and fear His majesty if she is going to properly represent Him.

Conclusion

All evangelical interpreters agree that the language of Revelation 19:11-16 is figurative. Even the most literal interpreters have not ventured to suggest that Christ will actually appear in heaven riding a white horse and wearing bloody robes, with a sword protruding from his mouth. The question is not whether or not the language is figurative, the question is what these figures of speech mean. The answer must be found in the Bible itself. Many of the figures of speech used in this passage are used in other places in Revelation, in contexts that refer to Jesus' covenantal presence among His people. And in the New Testament in general, the language of martial conflict, including the spread of the Gospel, is used frequently to refer to the Christian's warfare with Satan and the world. John is using figures of speech that all Christians are familiar with. "Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before" expresses the traditional and Biblical view of the spread of the Gospel in a figure of speech that is typical New Testament language. There is nothing unnatural or forced about the postmillennial interpretation.

By contrast, the premillennial interpreter Robert H. Mounce says of John's language in Revelation 19:11-16, "The imagery used to depict this great event reflects the Jewish tradition of a warrior Messiah more than the NT teaching of the second advent of Christ."¹⁴ The problem is not in John's imagery, but in Mounce's assumption that John is here speaking of the second coming. On one point, however, Mounce is certainly correct: the premillennial doctrine of the second coming resembles the Jewish Messianic hope of the first century. But Jesus and the apostles taught that this was a mistaken hope. The victory of Christ was won by the cross, a doctrine that was foolishness to the Gentiles and a stumbling block to the Jews. But to those who believe, the power of God!

John wrote to encourage the Church. Faced with the power of the Roman Empire and the opposition of the Jews, Christians might think their cause hopeless. The "inhabitants of Canaan" that Christ sent them to conquer no doubt appeared to be giants whose cities were secured by impregnable walls. John, following Moses' instruction to the priests (Dt. 20:1-4), reminds the Church that the battle is Christ's. He

14. *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 343.

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will lead us. He will give us the victory.

Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of good courage; be not affrighted, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest. (Josh. 1:9)