

# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 1

### Part 1: The Millennial Issue in Modern Theology

[Author's note: Many have requested that *Bibliotheca Sacra* publish a series of articles dealing with the contemporary discussion of the millennial issue in theology. Beginning with this Number, this series will be undertaken. It is the desire of the author to be constructive, not controversial; but due note will be taken of the many recent books which have appeared bearing on this subject. The author will welcome suggestions from readers.]

The events of the last quarter of a century or more have had a tremendous impact on the thinking of the scholarly world. In philosophy there has been a trend toward realism and increasing interest in ultimate values and ethics. In science the moral significance of scientific knowledge and the growing realization that physical science is a part of world life and meaning have emerged. In theology there has been what amounts to a similar revolution, particularly in eschatology.

#### Current Trends in Millennial Literature

One of the significant facts of the theology of the last century is its emphasis on eschatological or prophetic questions. Even the works of liberal theologians frequently discuss the Christian outlook. Millar Burrows, for instance, in his work *An Outline of Biblical Theology* rightly gives a long chapter to the subject, and current liberal theological anthologies such as Thomas Kepler's *Contemporary Thinking about Jesus* and his *Contemporary Religious Thought* both have considerable sections on eschatology from recent writings of liberal theological scholars.

For the most part, writings in eschatology among the liberals are limited to the search for ultimate ethical values rather than a statement of a prophetic program. The light cast on the path ahead is at best out of focus and presents a blurred perspective. The trend toward eschatology is significant, however, as a background to our present study of the millennium. for the present and does not attempt to solve the future course of human history.

The lines of millennial discussion were defined somewhat as for and against an earthly millennium. This seemed to be the significance of the trend of world events. Historic amillennialism was against the idea of a literal kingdom of Christ on earth and all signs seemed to point to no progress in this direction. The ground was provided for abandonment of postmillennial optimism and leaving to heavenly realms any idealistic system of peace and righteousness.

In the last two decades there has been, accordingly, an evident resurgence in amillennialism. The converts have come from many sources. Those who had become skeptical about a millennium on earth to be achieved through Christian influence and the church found it a natural conclusion that their error lay in taking too seriously the glowing prophecies of the Old Testament of a kingdom of righteousness and peace on earth. There were no signs of such an era on the horizon, and both Christians and non-Christians were talking darkly of the end of civilization and a third and final world war in which man would destroy himself. It seemed in the spirit of the times to conclude that there would be no millennium on earth and that freedom from sin and war was to be found only in heaven. While the downward course of the modern world was no embarrassment to premillennialists who had been preaching about such a trend for years, the church as a whole was unwilling to admit any accuracy in the premillennial view. Instead the tendency was to return to the conservatism of the Reformation which made no pretense of being specific about the millennium.

Three main streams of theology have converged in our day to make amillennialism without question the majority view of the church. First, the old conservatism which had abandoned the hope of Daniel Whitby for a millennium on earth found refuge in the ancient creeds, which for the most part say nothing about the millennium. Their position was that the real issue was faith in the Bible and in the person and work of Christ. Why argue about prophecy when the very foundations are threatened? As a great New Testament scholar put it in a private letter, "The issue of our day is for or against the Bible. We cannot afford to differ on other issues." While there is some force to this argument, Christianity will not survive on an undefined loyalty to Scripture. The hope of future events is inseparable from Christian faith and any vagueness weakens and limits the whole perspective.

A second influence in the resurgence of amillennialism is the growth in power of the Roman Catholic Church. Since the day of Augustine this body has been almost entirely amillennial. Their very structure of church government and their program of works depend on use of the Old Testament promises about the coming kingdom as fulfilled in the church. In a day when liberalism has weakened Protestantism, the solid influence of tradition and continuity of the Roman Church has had a profound appeal. Nothing could be more antithetical than the Roman Church and premillennialism, and its influence is solidly amillennial.

A third influence in the present power of amillennialism is found in liberal Protestant theology. With low views of the inspiration of Scripture and with no concern for any consistent interpretation of Scripture, the tendency toward skepticism in eschatology is marked. If postmillennialism could no longer be held, why not be skeptical of any millennium at all? Without availing themselves of historical arguments except when convenient to their purpose, liberals have united in almost one voice in their denunciation of premillennialism and the doctrine of an earthly reign of Christ.

In the liberal theological tendency toward amillennialism there appears an element which has not been evaluated properly in current arguments on the millennial issue. It is evident that premillennialism constitutes a large segment of conservative Christianity of our day. It was soon discovered by liberal theologians that it was a most effective device in combatting the old conservatism in theology to attack premillennialism. Any attack or discrediting of premillennialism redounded to the benefit of liberal theology without exposing them to embarrassing questions concerning their own belief in the Scriptures. Premillennialists could be attacked with impunity. Liberals who did so could pose as defenders of the Reformed faith, as those seeking the purity and unity of the church, as those who wanted to reclaim the Bible from a false and misleading form of interpretation. Liberals who could not stand examination on any essential of conservative Christian theology were found in the strange role of champions of Reformed theology because they denounced premillennialism. No doubt some of them were sincere in their error, but their zeal betrayed the hidden and sometimes unconscious motive.

In the last decade a further tendency to exploit this argument has appeared in the device to divide premillennialists into the old school of interpretation which often contented itself with a theology which was premillennial only in its eschatology, and the more recent type which makes premillennialism a system of theology. Conceding that premillennialism was ancient and to that extent honored, they denounced what they termed *dispensationalism* as a new and modern error.[3] Cf. Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1945). The subtitle of his book is "An examination of the claim of dispensationalists that the Christian Church is a mystery parenthesis which interrupts the fulfillment to Israel of the kingdom prophecies of the Old Testament." Scholars who had no interest whatever in premillennialism wrote on fine points of dispute among premillennialists as if the existence of unsolved problems and disagreements proved beyond doubt that the principles on which the interpretation was based were hopelessly involved. Conservative scholars were influenced into playing right into the hands of the desire of liberals to divide the remaining strength of conservative theology.

One of the curious aspects of current literature on the millennial issue is the singling out of the *Scofield Reference Bible* for attack. This edition of the Bible which has had unprecedented circulation has done much to popularize premillennial teachings and to provide ready helps of interpretation. It has probably done more to extend premillennialism in the last half century than any other volume. This accounts for the many attempts to discredit this work. The recent book of Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, a product of a lifelong study and a special year of research, brings most of its attack down to refuting the Scofield Bible. *Millennial Studies* by George L. Murray published in 1948, the result of twelve years of study on the millennial problem, mentions the Scofield Bible more than any other work. The refutation of the Scofield Bible is

curious because each succeeding writer apparently believes his predecessors have not succeeded in disposing of this work once-for-all. This belief apparently is well founded, for the Scofield Bible continues to be issued year after year in greater numbers than any of its refuters.

The current millennial debate is singular for its negative quality. While premillennialism has had poor handling by many of its own adherents, it has at least aimed at being constructive, offering a definite system of interpretation and providing a positive voice. While amillennialism has attracted many scholars and has produced many works on the millennial issue in the last two decades, for the most part their approach has been one of ridicule and attack on premillennialism rather than an ordered presentation of their own system of beliefs. This direction of published studies has been born of the nature of the amillennial theory—a denial of the millennium. Amillennialists have also rightly argued that if they successfully disposed of their opponents who were premillennial they would have no effective opposition to their own viewpoint. The negative attitude was also one of necessity, as amillennialists are by no means agreed on the very essentials of their own system of eschatology and millenarianism.

One of the most unfortunate and harmful aspects of the trend toward amillennialism is the desperation evidenced in the nature of their attempts to discredit other viewpoints. In particular, in their refutation of premillennialism every aberration which has been held by any premillenarian has been upheld as typical of the movement. Even scholars such as Allis and Kromminga, who do not descend to lower levels of debate, are guilty in numerous instances of the most flagrant *ad hominem* argument. Their obvious purpose is to prove that premillennialism has a tendency to heresy in all fields of theology. Kromminga, in his first reference to the Scofield Bible, attempts to prove that Scofield was guilty of “heretical aberration” in the doctrine of the Trinity. His proof for this is a rather obscure reference to Israel as the wife of Jehovah and the church as the wife of Christ.[4] D. H. Kromminga, *Millennium in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1945), pp. 23-24. Allis tries to link premillennialism with Russellism because both believe the Abrahamic Covenant is unconditional.[5] Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 48. Again, Allis in discussing the offer of the kingdom by Christ asserts that the issue is that if Christ offered the Jews a millennial kingdom He was by so much saying that the cross was unnecessary. He says the argument “amounts to this, Could men have been saved without the Cross?”[6] *Ibid.*, p. 75. As Allis would be the first to admit, no group of millennialists have been more faithful in preaching the necessity of the cross than premillennialists, and to say that their view requires declaring the cross unnecessary is a conclusion which no premillenarian would reach. Allis has forgotten that he is a Calvinist and that God can make a *bona fide* offer of something which in His sovereignty and foreknowledge He knows will not and cannot eventuate—a principle which has many illustrations in the Bible, as for instance the dealings of God with Moses (Exod 32:9-14; Num 14:11-20). This unfortunate tendency to raise false issues in the attack on premillennialism only confuses the issue, and makes partisans of those who should be in Christian fellowship however they may differ in the millennial doctrine. While objectivity has been lacking in all viewpoints of the millennium, on the scholarly level amillennialism has sinned the most. This defect will be discussed in great detail in the analysis of amillennialism which will appear later.

While not directly related to millennial literature, there has been a significant current trend in institutions of learning in America respecting the doctrine of the millennium. In theological institutions the common viewpoint is that of amillennialism. The most notable change has been in liberal seminaries, which were predominantly postmillennial before World War I. While there is still much talk of a “better world” and “bringing in the Kingdom,” it is quite divorced from millennial discussions. Most theological seminaries view the millennium as an unfruitful area for study and tend to suspend judgment on any detailed exegesis of related Scriptural passages.

A significant exception and contrast to the trend toward amillennialism is found in Bible institutes which, while having relatively lower scholastic standards, are definitely more Biblical in their curriculum than the great majority of theological seminaries. The Bible institute movement in America has not only been predominantly premillennial from the start, but there has been no noticeable trend away from this position. The way in which premillennialism is held by Bible institutes is also significant. The viewpoint is in part unconscious, that is, their curriculum is not designed to propagate premillennialism in itself. The acceptance of premillennialism is rather as a means of interpreting the entire Bible and acquainting students with a consistent form of interpretation. The thousands of institute graduates being poured forth each year constitute one of the bright spots for premillennialism in the current trend. On a popular level Bible institutes or related organizations publish a large amount of literature which follows the premillennial interpretation of Scripture.

Taken as a whole, the current trend in millennial literature indicates a mounting attack on premillennialists by those who hold the amillennial position, a forsaking of postmillennialism as outmoded, and an increasingly significant use of the millennial issue by liberals to divide and conquer those remaining in conservative theological circles. The qualities of the respective arguments remain for detailed study.

## Importance of Millennial Doctrine

The question has been raised whether the discussion of the millennial doctrine is in itself important and worthy of the consideration of the scholarly world. There remains today a tendency to dismiss the whole subject as belonging to another age and as being foreign to intellectual studies of our day. D. C. MacIntosh refers to premillennialism as obsolete: “the whole obsolete idea of a literal, visible return of Jesus to this earth.”[7] D. C. MacIntosh, *op. cit.*, p. 203. On the other hand, the continued production of books on the subject points to a growing realization that the issue is more important than appears on the surface. If premillennialism is only a dispute about what will happen in a future age which is quite removed from present issues, that is one thing. If, however, premillennialism is a system of interpretation which involves the meaning and significance of the entire Bible, defines the meaning and course of the present age, determines the present purpose of God, and gives both material and method to theology, that is something else. It is the growing realization that premillennialism is more than a dispute about Revelation 20 that has precipitated the extended arguments on the issue in our day. For the first time it seems to be commonly recognized that premillennial theology has become a *system* of theology, not an alternate view of eschatology which is unrelated to theology as a whole.

It has already been noted that premillennialism is a stubborn obstacle to liberal theology as well as being utterly opposed to the principles governing Roman Catholic theology. The reason for this is that premillennialism uses a literal interpretation of the prophetic Word which is the backbone of comprehensive Bible study. Premillennialism not only takes the Bible as authoritative in opposition to liberalism, but believes that an ordinary believer can understand the main import of the Scriptures including the prophetic Word. This is utterly contrary to the Roman conception. The present Bible-study movement in this country as illustrated in Bible and prophetic conferences and the Bible institutes is almost entirely premillennial in its background. In fact it is considered a common charge against premillennialists that they are guilty of Bibliolatry or worship of the Bible. Opposition to premillennialism particularly by the liberals is largely against regarding the Bible as the only final authority. MacIntosh states flatly that “the explanation” for “the long-expected and theoretically hoped-for second coming of Christ...is to be found in the doctrine of the miraculous inspiration and consequent literal infallibility of the Bible.”[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 192-193. This to him is “incredible.”[9] *Ibid.*, p. 193. It is inevitable that defense of premillennialism becomes a defense of the Bible itself and its sole authority in speaking of future events and programs of God.

The millennial doctrine determines also large areas of Biblical interpretation which are not in themselves prophetic in character. The distinctions in dispensational dealings of God, the contrasts between the Mosaic period, the Abrahamic promises, the present age of grace, and the unfulfilled prophecies about the coming kingdom are of major importance in Biblical interpretation and systematic theology. Many of these issues are largely determined by the millennial doctrine. Distinctions in particular which pertain to the character of the present age in its purpose and program are involved. If the present purpose of God is to bring in a millennium through Christian influence and preaching, that is one thing; if there is no millennium at all, that is another; if the millennium is yet to be fulfilled on the earth through the second coming of Christ, that is still another. The concept of the present age is therefore vitally affected by the doctrine of the millennium. It is not too much to say that premillennialism is a determining factor in Biblical interpretation of comparable importance to the doctrines of verbal inspiration, the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, and bodily resurrection. These doctrines are held by both premillennialists and conservative amillennialists. It is of course true that to individual faith a denial of the deity of Christ is more momentous and far-reaching than denial of premillennialism, but as far as a system of interpretation is concerned both are vital. The growing recognition of the importance of the millennial doctrine is one of the principal causes of resurgence of interest in this field.

## Contemporary Viewpoints on Millennialism

Various conceptions of the millennium are inevitably related to the doctrine of the second advent of Christ. The four views of the Lord's coming which have existed in the last two millenniums {sic} carry with them a concept of the millennium. As a preliminary to later more detailed consideration of these theories, a survey of the field is in order.

*Spiritualized second advent.* A common modern view of the Lord's return is the so-called spiritual view which identifies the coming of Christ as a perpetual advance of Christ in the church that includes many particular events. William Newton Clarke, for instance, held that the promises of the second coming are fulfilled by "his spiritual presence with his people," which is introduced by the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, accompanied by the overthrow of Jerusalem, and ultimately fulfilled by continual spiritual advance in the church.[10] William N. Clarke, *An Outline of Christian Theology*, fifth edition, pp. 443-46. In other words it is not an event, but it includes all the events of the Christian era which are the work of Christ. Such a viewpoint not only fails to provide for all the attendant events related to the second coming of Christ but eliminates the millennium completely. Essentially it is amillennial, though not the historic type. This viewpoint—held by many liberals of our day—contributes practically nothing to the millennial issue. Between the first and second comings is the fulfillment of the millennium. Its adherents differ as to whether the millennium is being fulfilled in the earth (Augustine) or whether it is being fulfilled by the saints in heaven (Warfield). It may be summed up in the idea that there will be no more millennium than there is now, and that the eternal state immediately follows the second coming of Christ. It is similar to postmillennialism in that Christ comes after what they regard as the millennium. As they freely recognize that their concept of the millennium is quite foreign to the premillennial view they have been given the title amillennial by most writers, but there continues a measure of disagreement. The evolution of amillennialism will be discussed later and its various turns defined.

*Premillennialism.* This term derives its meaning from the belief that the second coming of Christ will be premillennial or before the millennium, and that a literal reign on earth for a millennium will follow. As a system of doctrine it is necessarily more literal in its interpretation of prophecy than the other viewpoints. It views the end of the present age as sudden and catastrophic, with great judgment upon the wicked and the rescue of the righteous. It is characteristic of premillennialism both ancient and modern to distinguish the dealings of God with Israel and with the church. As Van Oosterzee (1817-1882), a Dutch theologian who was premillennial brings out, premillennialism distinguishes the church which Christ founded as separate from the saints of the Old Testament: "It is, however, more exact, not to fix the date of the beginning of the *Christian Church* before the appearing of the historical Christ.... From the outpouring of the Spirit on the first Christian Pentecost the Church was really brought to life." [13] Jan Jacob Van Oosterzee, *Christian Dogmatics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), II, 701. Premillennialism generally holds to a revival of the Jewish nation and their repossession of their ancient land when Christ returns. Satan will be bound (Rev 20:2) and a theocratic kingdom of righteousness, peace, and tranquility will ensue. The righteous are raised from the dead before the millennium and participate in its blessings. The wicked dead are not raised until after the millennium. The eternal state will follow the judgment of the wicked. Premillennialism is obviously a viewpoint quite removed from either amillennialism or postmillennialism. It attempts to find a literal fulfillment for all the prophecies in the Old and New Testament concerning a righteous kingdom of God on earth. It does not lend itself to liberal theology as do the other millennial theories. Premillennialism assumes the authority and accuracy of the Scriptures, and the hermeneutical principle of a literal interpretation wherever this is possible.

While there is confusing differences in detail with all the millennial viewpoints, the main lines of interpretation are rather clearly drawn. The issue is whether there will be a literal reign of Christ on the earth following His second advent. The issue is not one which should divide evangelicals or arouse needless antagonism. Genuine and spiritual Christians have held various millennial views. The issue is, however, important. Much of the argument produced has been too partisan to be objective. Prejudice is as natural in this field of theology as in any other. On the whole the millennial issue has been badly handled. It is the aim of the present discussion to be as objective as possible. To this end the study will continue by treatment of the rise and fall of postmillennialism first, to be followed in order by the treatment of amillennialism and premillennialism. The strength and weakness of each system will be analyzed. It will not be the purpose of this study to dissolve differences which exist within any system except as they have bearing on the strength of the system itself.

Dallas, Texas

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## Chapter 2

### Postmillennialism

One of the outstanding facts about postmillennialism is that it was, until the present generation, one of the most important and influential millennial theories. It was probably the dominant Protestant eschatology of the nineteenth century and was embraced by Unitarian, Arminian, and Calvinist alike. It influenced as well the prevailing concept of amillennialism during this period. In the twentieth century the course of history, progress in Biblical studies, and the changing attitude of philosophy arrested its progress and brought about its apparent discard by all schools of theology. Postmillennialism is not a current issue in millenarianism, but the principles that brought it into being and resulted in its downfall are highly significant.

While postmillennialism is the most recent of millennial theories, a number of reasons prompt the study of this aspect of millenarianism before other viewpoints. The millennial issue as a whole tends to become complicated and burdened with detail until the principles are often forgotten. The postmillennial view because of its relative simplicity affords a typical study in millennialism which throws significant light on the problems presented by other views. The beginnings, rise, and present decline of postmillennialism afford a test case for millennial doctrine. The Cartesian principle of solving the more simple problems first justifies the present order of consideration.

As previously defined, postmillennialism is the doctrinal belief that Christ will return after (*post*) the millennium and usher in the eternal state with the final judgment of men and angels. It is opposed to premillennialism, which holds that Christ will return before (*pre*) the millennium. Many variations exist within postmillennialism in the concept of the nature of the second advent of Christ and of the nature of the millennium itself. Postmillennialism sometimes almost merges with amillennialism, and yet in other forms is quite distinct. James Snowden, for instance, consistently classifies amillennarians as included in postmillennialism.

### The Rise of Postmillennialism

*Postmillennialism not Apostolic.* While Daniel Whitby (1638-1725) is commonly given the credit for the rise of postmillennialism as a division of millenarianism, the roots which brought his theory to life extend back to the early centuries of the church. All seem to agree that postmillennialism is quite foreign to the apostolic church. There is no trace of anything in the church which could be classified as postmillennialism in the first two or three centuries. The millenarianism of the early church was premillennial, that is, expected the return of Christ before a millennium on earth.

*Rise of figurative interpretation.* The first notable denial of this premillennial viewpoint was made by Origen (185-253). His allegorical method of interpretation resulted in the destruction of not only the millennial doctrine but most other important aspects of Christian belief including the doctrine of resurrection. Origen, however, was clearly not a postmillenarian, and his contribution is his method of allegorical and figurative interpretation which became later a component of postmillennialism.

*Rise of millennial inter-advent theory.* The eschatology of Augustine was an important milestone in the history of millennialism. He held that the age between the first and second advents is the millennium of which the Scriptures speak and that the second advent would occur at the end of the millennium. This is definitely a postmillennial viewpoint as it places the second advent *after* the millennium. For various reasons, however, Augustine is better classified as an amillenarian inasmuch as his view amounts to a denial that there will be any literal millennium on earth. His important contribution to postmillennialism is obvious, however, especially as his amillennial views became the dominant belief of both the Roman

church and the Reformers.

*Failure of Augustinian millennialism.* While Augustine was not a postmillenarian in the modern sense of the word, it is highly significant that postmillennialism arose partly from the success and partly from the failure of the Augustinian view. Augustine, with his denial of a millennium after the second advent, succeeded in displacing premillenarianism as the prevailing belief of the church. His most significant contribution, however, lay in the fact that history has proved the details of his system to be wrong and the resulting readjustment made postmillennialism seem plausible. Allis, an ardent Augustinian, sums Augustine's contribution in these words:

“He taught that the millennium is to be interpreted spiritually as fulfilled in the Christian Church. He held that the binding of Satan took place during the earthly ministry of our Lord (Luke x.18 ), that the first resurrection is the new birth of the believer (John v.25 ), and that the millennium must correspond, therefore, to the inter-adventual period or Church age. This involved the interpreting of Rev. xx.1-6 as a ‘recapitulation’ of the preceding chapters instead of as describing a new age following chronologically on the events set forth in chap. xix . Living in the first half of the first millennium of the Church's history, Augustine naturally took the 1000 years of Rev. xx . literally; and he expected the second advent to take place at the end of that period. But since he somewhat inconsistently identified the millennium with what remained of the sixth chiliad of human history, he believed that this period might end about A.D. 650 with a great outburst of evil, the revolt of Gog, which would be followed by the coming of Christ in judgment.”[1] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 3.

As Allis goes on to admit, Augustine's prophecy of the return of Christ at about A.D. 650 did not materialize, nor did the hopeful adjustment of this date to 1000 A.D. by his followers meet with any more success. Obviously there was something wrong with Augustine's interpretation. Even the expedient of the Reformers who held that they were in the “little season” (Rev 20:3) has now with the passing years become untenable. It was the easiest way out to conclude that Augustine was wrong in dating the binding of Satan with the earthly ministry of Christ (Luke 10:18). The millennium, then, began sometime during the centuries following. Another view was that the millennium itself was of indefinite duration, not 1000 years. Either interpretation paved the way for postmillennialism with its concept of a millennium at the close of the present age preceded by a time of conflict and trouble. Thus while the theory of Augustine was proved untrue in its main elements, it nevertheless opened the way for both a continued amillennialism and for the rise of postmillennialism.

*Joachim of Floris.* The first genuine postmillennialist according to Kromminga[2] D. H. Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church*, p. 20. was Joachim of Floris, a twelfth century Roman Catholic writer, founder and abbot of the monastery of Giovanni del Fiore (or Floris) in Calabria. His exposition of Revelation is a classic of the period. His view of the millennium is that it begins and continues as a rule of the Holy Spirit.[3] Cf. Benz, *Zeitschrift fuer Kirchengeschichte* (1931), p. 86f, cited by D. H. Kromminga, *op. cit.*, p. 20. He had in view three dispensations, the first from Adam to John the Baptist; the second began with John; and the third with St. Benedict (480-543), founder of his monasteries. The three dispensations were respectively of the Father, of the Son, and of the Spirit. Joachim predicted that about 1260 the final development would take place and righteousness would triumph.[4] Cf. *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, VI, 184, s.v. “Joachim of Fiore.” While Kromminga is probably right in classifying Joachim as a postmillenarian, it is clear that he differs from the modern type, though it is still common to designate the millennium as a reign of the Holy Spirit.[5] Cf. A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1013, “a period...under special influence of the Holy Ghost.”

*Postmillennialism before 1700.* In the interval between Joachim and Daniel Whitby, no doubt others qualified as postmillennial. Berkhof cites a number of Reformed theologians in the Netherlands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who were postmillennial: “Coccejus, Alting, the two Vitringas, d'Outrein, Witsius, Hoornbeek, Koelman, and Brakel” of which the majority expected the millennium to be future.[6] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 716. Strangely, in his discussion of postmillennialism Berkhof does not so much as mention Daniel Whitby who popularized postmillennialism in the eighteenth century. A. H. Strong, however, makes no apology for being a follower of Whitby, stating, “Our own interpretation of Rev 20:1-10, was first given, for substance, by Whitby.”[7] Strong, *op. cit.*, p. 1014.

*Daniel Whitby.* Modern postmillennialism is usually considered the child of Daniel Whitby. His major contribution was his reversal of the prevailing amillennial viewpoint of Revelation 20. Augustine, it will be remembered, held that Revelation 20

was a recapitulation of the previous chapters of Revelation. Whitby advanced the idea that Revelation 20 followed chronologically the events of Revelation 19, and that the millennium, while in the inter-advent period, was still future, possibly remotely future. This at once provided a way of escape from the incompatibility of the events of history of his day with millennial prophecies and allowed a more literal interpretation of the glowing promises of a golden age of righteousness and peace on earth to be fulfilled in the future.

*Postmillennialism becomes an influential system of theology.* It can hardly be said that the view of Whitby was a result of a movement to return to literal interpretation of prophecy. Whitby himself was a Unitarian. His writings particularly as bearing on the Godhead were publicly burned and he was denounced as a heretic. He was a liberal and a freethinker, untrammelled by traditions or previous conceptions of the church. His views on the millennium would probably have never been perpetuated if they had not been so well keyed to the thinking of the times. The rising tide of intellectual freedom, science, and philosophy, coupled with humanism, had enlarged the concept of human progress and painted a bright picture of the future. Whitby's view of a coming golden age for the church was just what people wanted to hear. It fitted the thinking of the times. It is not strange that theologians scrambling for readjustment in a changing world should find in Whitby just the key they needed. It was attractive to all kinds of theology. It provided for the conservative a seemingly more workable principle of interpreting Scripture. After all, the prophets of the Old Testament knew what they were talking about when they predicted an age of peace and righteousness. Man's increasing knowledge of the world and scientific improvements which were coming could fit into this picture. On the other hand, the concept was pleasing to the liberal and skeptic. If they did not believe the prophets, at least they believed that man was now able to improve himself and his environment. They too believed a golden age was ahead.

*Two principal types of postmillennialism.* Stemming from Whitby these groups provided two types of postmillennialism which have persisted to the twentieth century: (1) a Biblical type of postmillennialism, finding its material in the Scriptures and its power in God; (2) the evolutionary or liberal theological type which bases its proof on confidence in man to achieve progress through natural means. These two widely separated systems of belief have one thing in common, the idea of ultimate progress and solution of present difficulties. Postmillennialism in itself does not have the principle or method to attain a system of theology, yet its principal elements constitute a distinct branch of theology. The influence and contribution of postmillennialism to theology is at least worthy of consideration.

## **Postmillennialism as a Theological System**

The diverse elements which have united in agreement on postmillennialism make it difficult to make fair general statements of the position of postmillennialism. Included in postmillennialism are Unitarians who deny the deity of Christ and inspiration of Scripture as well as Calvinists who affirm both. From the vantage point of the observed history of postmillennialism over several centuries, it is possible, however, to speak in at least general terms of this answer to the millennial question and draw some significant conclusions.

*The postmillennial attitude toward the Scriptures.* Within the ranks of postmillenarians there are all types of attitudes toward the Scriptures. Charles Hodge, an ardent postmillennialist, without doubt accepted the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God. On the other hand Walter Rauschenbusch and Shirley Jackson Case, who are classified by some as postmillennialists, felt free to deal with the Scriptures with a light hand. A basic fault of postmillennialism is its method of interpretation of Scripture rather than its doctrine of inspiration. In order to find fulfillment of millennial promises in the present age it is necessary for them to follow an allegorical or figurative system of interpretation in great areas of Biblical prophecy. This method has historically subverted not only prophecy but every important doctrine. Without question the real issue in the millennial controversy is right here. Practically all scholars agree that a strictly literal interpretation of prophecy leads to the premillennial concept of the millennium, while if the figurative method be employed, Scripture may be interpreted in favor of other views. Postmillennialists quite frankly accept the figurative method as necessary to their interpretation.

James H. Snowden in a determined effort to establish postmillennialism as against premillennialism nevertheless writes: "It is true that many of these prophecies when so applied must be taken poetically and not literally.... It is further true that many of these prophecies are as yet only partially and often only very faintly realized...."[8] James H. Snowden, *The Coming of*

*the Lord* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1919), pp. 237-38. Snowden, while admitting that premillenarians prevailed in early centuries, traces the introduction of the figurative and allegorical method of interpretation to Origen: “Origen in the first half of the third century was the first to raise an influential voice against the premillenarian view. He interpreted the millennial imagery of the Bible in a figurative sense and thus adopted a principle of interpretation which has been followed ever since, though he also introduced a method of ‘allegorizing’ Scripture which has long since been discarded.”[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19. It should be noted that Snowden admits that the figurative method was new in the third century and was therefore not apostolic or in common use before; that he distinguishes the allegorical and figurative methods of interpretation in an attempt to escape the excesses of Origen; and that he claims that the result of the adoption of this new method was the abandonment of premillenarianism. Snowden presents the usual arguments in favor of the figurative method of interpretation: that the Bible is an Oriental book and abounds in figurative language; that literal interpretations are often “absurd”; that all viewpoints find some allegorical passages; that apocalyptic literature is especially symbolic.[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 35-39. Without discussing further the relative merits of the figurative method, it is at least clear that postmillennialism necessarily adopts this method of interpreting millennial prophecy—a method which is admittedly not apostolic in its historic origin. Postmillennialism depends upon a system of interpretation which does not find literal fulfillment of the millennial passages. The dangers of this system are well illustrated in the history of the church since Origen its founder and infiltrate the systems of interpretation of both the Roman church and modern liberalism. Making Scripture figurative which should be taken literally subverts its meaning and evades its authority. The result is the denial of the plain intent of the Scriptures.

*The postmillennial doctrine of the millennium.* Generally speaking, postmillennialism finds the millennium in this present inter-advent period. If millennial prophecy is taken more literally, this is usually pushed to the remote future; if more liberties are taken in explaining millennial Scriptures, the entire present age is considered the millennium, differing from the amillennial concept only in the idea of a growing triumph and final victory before the second advent. James Snowden takes this latter view and finds the kingdom of God in the present age the only earthly millennium which will ever exist.

Snowden’s contribution may be divided into two aspects—his concept of the kingdom of God and his interpretation of Revelation 20. Snowden’s interpretation of Revelation 20 amounts to an endorsement of the amillennial position. His lengthy chapter on the interpretation of Revelation 20 is principally one of ridicule of the premillennial interpretation. He is quite sure that the premillennialists are wrong. When he faces the problem of a positive interpretation, he finds it difficult to offer more than two possible interpretations. He frankly is not sure of his interpretation: “We may be sure what a passage of Scripture does not mean, and yet not be sure what it does mean.”[11] *Ibid.*, p. 177. In general he offers two views: (1) that the events mentioned in Revelation 20:4-6 are already past—“The souls whom John saw in the vision are the souls of the martyrs and confessors reappearing in the faithful and brave Christians in the days of the Roman persecution”:[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 178-79. (2) that the millennium mentioned here is a picture of the souls in heaven—following the amillennial interpretation of Warfield.[13] *Ibid.*, p. 181. According to Allis, this viewpoint originated in Duesterdieck (1859) and Kliefoth (1874).[14] Allis, *op. cit.*, 5. Snowden finds the second viewpoint preferable “This seems to us to give a clear and practical meaning to this passage.”[15] Snowden, *op. cit.*, p. 184. In effect Snowden rules out Revelation 20 as casting any light on the form of the millennium which will eventuate in the earth. Snowden’s doctrine of the millennium is reduced to his concept of the kingdom of God in its course in the world before the second advent. If it were not for the evident idea of progress and triumph in the earth of the kingdom of God Snowden would be classified as an amillennialist. His concept of the kingdom of God is definitely postmillennial in its details and deserves a careful study.

The kingdom of God to Snowden is a rule of God in the hearts of believers in Christ. He defines it: “The sense, however, in which it is commonly used is the rule of God in the hearts of obedient souls. It is a general designation for all those in all ages who turn to God in faith and constitute the total society of the redeemed.”[16] *Ibid.*, p. 51. The present age is the process of growth of this kingdom in human hearts, and the millennium on earth is achieved through the advance of this kingdom of God. He finds that the kingdom is not materialistic, political or of the earth, but it is rather spiritual and within the heart. Snowden’s exposition of the spirituality of the kingdom is at once typical and the heart of postmillennialism:

“In the New Testament the material trappings of the kingdom, as prefigured in the Old Testament in forms adapted to the religious development of that day, are stripped off and it appears in its pure spirituality. It is now clearly brought out that the kingdom has its seat in the heart and consists in the rule of God in the soul or in moral and spiritual dispositions and habits.

Jesus expressly set forth this inward spiritual nature of the kingdom in contrast with the outward materialistic form of the Jewish expectation of his day: ‘And being asked by the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God cometh, he answered them and said, The kingdom cometh not with observation: neither shall they say, Lo, here! or, There! for lo, the kingdom of God is within you’ (Luke 17:20-21). Paul expresses the same truth when he declares that ‘the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Rom 14:17). It begins in repentance and faith and goes on to purify and pervade the whole personality in mind and heart, soul and body, character and conduct and life. It sets up the throne of God in the heart, ‘casting down imaginations, and every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God, and brings every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ’ (2 Cor 10:5). The beatitudes of Jesus describe its inner spirit and substance as humility, meekness, righteousness, mercy, purity and peacefulness. Paul, describing the same inner kingdom, says ‘the fruit of the light is in all goodness and righteousness and truth’ (Eph 5:9), and ‘the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control’ (Gal 5:22-23).”[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

Snowden then accommodates other aspects of truth to this central idea of the kingdom of God within the individual. The church is only a means of expression of this kingdom, not the kingdom itself. This accounts for the failures of the church. Snowden labors to justify the paradoxical term “democratic kingdom” in an attempt to link postmillennialism with the political trend toward democracy immediately following the first World War.[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 61-68. He finds further that Jesus did not accept the prevailing Jewish opinions of the first century of a literal kingdom on earth: He merely “adopted this mode of expression and accommodated his teaching to it...”[19] *Ibid.*, p. 68.

In general, therefore, the postmillennial concept of the millennium is a rule of the Spirit of God in the heart, beginning in the past and continuing in the future in ever increasing power. Christ is now on the throne in heaven and will never have an earthly throne. The righteousness and peace of the kingdom refer to the kingdom of God, not the whole earth. The appeal is to the individual to let the Spirit reign in the heart and achieve millennial spiritual blessings as a result.

*The postmillennial idea of progress.* The postmillennial viewpoint is definitely optimistic in regard to the future, that is, they believe there will be definite progress toward the goal of the triumph of the gospel and the power of God in the world. In this they are opposed to premillenarians who believe that the millennium will be brought about by the sudden return of Christ and the accompanying catastrophic events. The parables of Matthew 13 are interpreted by postmillenarians as presenting the progress of the Gospel and the triumph of the power of God over evil. The mustard seed becomes a great tree, speaking of the growth of the kingdom of God. The leaven, which postmillennialism regards as the triumph of the Gospel, leavens the whole lump—converts the whole world.

David Brown, a leading nineteenth century postmillenarian promotes this viewpoint: “The *growing* character of the kingdom, taught by the ‘mustard seed,’ and the *penetrating* and *assimilating* character, taught by ‘the leaven,’ go on till ‘the whole (earth) is leavened,’ and all the world have been brought to lodge in the branches of the mighty tree of life.”[20] David Brown, *Christ’s Second Coming: Will it be Pre-Millennial?* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1851), p. 333. Snowden who agrees with this interpretation quotes Trench with approbation on the same point: “Nor can we consider these words, ‘till the whole is leavened,’ as less than a prophecy of a final complete triumph of the gospel in that it will diffuse itself through all nations, and purify and ennoble all life.”[21] Cited by Snowden, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

Snowden goes on to emphasize the character of this development of the kingdom. It is not only progressive but is slow and not without periodic crises. Snowden cites the conclusions of geologists that the age of the earth is 100,000,000 years and quotes Professor Nathanael S. Shaler of Harvard that “man will probably continue for another hundred million years.”[22] Snowden, *ibid.*, p. 79. Cf. Nathaniel S. Shaler, *Man and the Earth*, p. 215. It is clear that Snowden embraces fully the conclusions of evolutionists regarding progress in the earth, and that with this theory as a guiding light the second advent is projected into the future by 100,000,000 years. Snowden goes on, “This scientific view of the age of the earth is the background against which we must now read and interpret Scripture teaching; and we may expect to find that it will revolutionize our view of Scripture at points, just as had been done by astronomy and geology. For when we come to look at it, we find in the Scriptures clear intimations and indications that the second coming of Christ with the end of the world is yet a long way off.... The world is only in the morning of its day and humanity is only in its infancy. Vast vistas of time stretch out before it in which our world will develop its resources and man will grow into maturity. All our achievements, industry and invention, science and art, education and social progress, liberty and brotherhood, ethics and religion, are only

in their bud and will put forth their full bloom and ripened fruit. Even now [1919] world unity is looming up on the horizon and will be achieved to-morrow; and then the path will just be cleared for unified and speeded-up human progress.... We have good grounds, then, for believing that the end of the world, with its attendant events of the second coming of Christ, the general resurrection and the final judgment, is yet a very remote event.”[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81. One wonders whether if Snowden were living today he would care to make the same statement.

The progress of the kingdom is attended, however, by periodic crises. Snowden finds this in accord with nature in which a flower after long growth suddenly bursts into bloom. He finds parallels in Scripture—the crises of the Exodus, the death and resurrection of Christ, Pentecost, the destruction of Jerusalem, the World War. He concludes: “The kingdom of God has followed and will follow this general law of gradual yet catastrophic growth from its first inception in this world to its climax in the final events that will issue in the eternal state.”[24] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

*Method of consummating the kingdom.* At no point does the premillennial and postmillennial viewpoints clash more abruptly than on the method of consummating the kingdom. The postmillenarian believes that the millennium will be brought on the earth by a long process of preaching of the Gospel with subsequent transformation of society. The kingdom of God reaches its consummation principally by the work of the Holy Spirit, but it includes many other factors. A. A. Hodge, a postmillenarian, writes: “The process by which this kingdom grows through its successive stages towards its ultimate completion can of course be very inadequately understood by us. It implies the ceaseless operation of the mighty power of God working through all the forces and laws of nature and culminating in the supernatural manifestations of grace and of miracle. The Holy Ghost is everywhere present, and he works directly alike in the ways we distinguish as natural and as supernatural—alike through appointed instruments and agencies, and immediately by his direct personal power.”[25] A. A. Hodge, *Popular Lectures on Theological Themes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1887), pp. 295-96. Hodge goes on to enumerate the church, civilization, science, political and ecclesiastical societies, Christian missions, Christian workers as means to the end. He finds the kingdom coming: “in all the growing of the seeds and all the blowing of the winds; in every event, even the least significant, which has advanced the interests of the human family....”[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 296-97. It is clear that postmillennialism as to its method of bringing in the kingdom of God is quite removed from the premillennial doctrine that the kingdom will be consummated by the second advent.

*The postmillennial doctrine of the second advent.* Not all postmillenarians will agree on the doctrine of the second advent. In general, their viewpoints fall into two classifications. The more Biblical type of postmillennialism conceives of the millennium as a thousand years or extended time yet future in which the Gospel will triumph, at the close of which Christ will return to the earth in a bodily second advent which is a distinct and important event.

Charles Hodge may be taken as representative of this Biblical type of postmillennialism. He sums up his doctrine of the second advent as follows: “The common Church doctrine is, first, that there is to be a second personal, visible, and glorious advent of the Son of God. Secondly, that the events which are to precede that advent, are (1) The universal diffusion of the Gospel; or, as our Lord expresses it, the ingathering of the elect; this is the vocation of the Christian Church. (2) The conversion of the Jews, which is to be national. As their casting away was national, although a remnant was saved; so their conversion may be national, although some may remain obdurate. (3) The coming of Antichrist. Thirdly, that the events which are to attend the second advent are:—(1) The resurrection of the dead, of the just and of the unjust. (2) The general judgment. (3) The end of the world. And, (4) the consummation of Christ’s kingdom.”[27] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), III, 792.

Hodge goes on to recognize that many other theologians conceive of the coming of Christ as repeated and spiritual rather than bodily.[28] Charles Hodge, *ibid.*, pp. 792-800. Snowden is a representative of this latter school of thought. Snowden finds that Christ “comes” at various critical points in history—in the Old Testament against Babylon and Assyria, to the Ephesian church in the New Testament (Rev 2:5), to the churches in Sardis and Philadelphia (Rev 3:3, 11-12).[29] Snowden, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-28. Snowden finds the conversion of Constantine, the Reformation, the Civil War in the United States, and the first World War as illustrations of the coming of the Lord. Snowden concludes: “Every act of judgment and justice and every new manifestation of sympathy and service is a coming of God and of Christ.”[30] *Ibid.*, p. 128. He goes on to cite the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” as evidence: “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” In

particular he finds the coming of the Lord in the destruction of Jerusalem which he treats at length, the coming of the Lord in His resurrection, and the coming of the Lord on the day of Pentecost.[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 128-140. In addition to these “comings” of Christ, Snowden speaks of a “final coming of Christ”[32] *Ibid.*, p. 141. which is at “the end of the world in a remote future.”[33] *Ibid.*, p. 143. In this final coming of Christ, Snowden places the general resurrection and final judgment, both of which he hastens to qualify as spiritual rather than physical.

It is clear from this brief survey of the postmillennial doctrine of the second coming that the “blessed hope” of an imminent return of Christ is entirely lost in the postmillennial viewpoint. While Hodge is literal in his interpretation of Scripture to the point of recognizing the conversion of the Jews, in his view the coming of the Lord is no more imminent than in Snowden’s. Further, the doctrine of the second coming itself is slurred and obscured by including in the doctrine every providential work of God in the history of the world. current issue in theology. While it is not the purpose of this discussion to refute postmillennialism, the system can be analyzed with a view to determining the cause of its collapse in our generation. Of necessity, the discussion will be brief on each cause. The important fact is that postmillennialism has declined and its reasons are significant.

*The inherent weakness of postmillennialism as a system.* As a system of theology based upon a subjective spiritualizing of Scripture, postmillennialism lacks the central principles necessary for coherence. Each postmillennialist is left more or less to his own ingenuity in solving the problem of what to do with prophecies of a millennium on earth. Even a random survey of their interpretations of such a key passage as Revelation 20, as previously discussed, demonstrate this lack of uniformity. The result is that postmillennialism has no unified front to protect itself from the inroads of other interpretations. At best postmillennialism is superimposed upon systems of theology which were developed without its aid. When an interpretation is equally acceptable to the Calvinist, Arminian and Unitarian, it ceases to be a determinative principle.

*Trend toward liberalism.* During the last century postmillennialism has found it impossible to resist a trend toward liberalism. While premillennialism, for instance, is unchanged in its attitude toward the inspiration and authority of Scripture and all major doctrines, there has been a most noticeable trend toward liberalism in institutions and groups which have embraced postmillennialism. The contrast of Charles Hodge and James Snowden in succeeding generations of postmillennialists is most illuminating. The significant fact is that postmillennialism lends itself to liberalism with only minor adjustments. If millennial prophecies could be spiritualized, why not the doctrine of inspiration, the deity of Christ, the substitutional atonement, the doctrine of resurrection, and the final judgment? The principle of spiritualizing Scripture and avoiding its literal exegesis if applied to prophecy could as well be applied to other fields. In any event, the old conservative, Biblical postmillennialism has long since passed from the contemporary scene.

*Failure to fit facts of current history.* Probably the immediate cause of the decline of postmillennialism was the events of the first half of the twentieth century involving two great world wars. While Snowden and others continued to proclaim their postmillennialism after the first World War, their millennium was far removed from the contemporary scene. No longer was it possible to preach that the promised millennium was at hand. The cold facts of world affairs brought a chill to postmillenarians. In any case, their cause was lost and they rapidly lost adherents. The second World War with its brutality and world tension which followed stilled apparently forever the idea of anything comparable to a millennium on earth. As postmillennialism had risen in an atmosphere of scientific and educational progress, so it declined in an atmosphere of war and world chaos.

*Trend toward realism in theology and philosophy.* The first half of the twentieth century witnessed also a change in the attitude of liberal theology and philosophy. In theology, the humanistic liberalism of the first twenty-five years of the century began to disappear. Liberals found that their philosophy and theology was impractical. It did not produce converts and inspire benevolence. There was need for a return to Biblical ground and more realism in dealing with human sin. The trend in philosophy kept pace. It too began to adjust itself to a world of real sin and strife. The second World War had a terrific impact on both liberalism and philosophy. A survey of their writings during this period will demonstrate a new appreciation of sin, of divine sovereignty, of human weakness, and the recognition of a possible catastrophic end of the world and ultimate judgment of God. Such a theological and philosophical atmosphere did not generate new converts to postmillennialism. Institutions which had formerly taught this viewpoint moved over into the less specific camp of amillennialism. The facts of the contemporary scene seem to point to no millennium on earth and no definable progress in

making the world a Christian community. Postmillennialism was cut of step and outmoded.

*Trend toward amillennialism.* Having lost hope of a golden age and having real doubts whether the world as such will be brought under the sway of Christian principles, it remained to find a new millennial theory. Amillennialism seemed to be the answer for many. This viewpoint gave some freedom. They could believe the coming of the Lord indefinitely postponed, or they could believe it was imminent. They could believe the present age was a millennium if they chose, or they could relegate it to heaven. They would be in the comfortable fellowship of most of the Reformers, the Roman Church, and modern liberal theologians. They could at least unite on a negative—they did not believe in a literal millennium or kingdom on the earth.

*The remaining millennial issue.* The decline of postmillennialism brought into sharper focus the clash between amillennialism and premillennialism. This, at least, is the present area of debate. Some central problems of postmillennialism remain: the principle of spiritualizing Scripture or giving it a figurative meaning, the subjective approach by which each expositor is given wide liberty in determining the meaning of a passage, and the search for principles of interpretation which will provide a unified system of theology. The decline of postmillennialism is a significant failure of the spiritualizing principle of interpretation and the failure of Biblical expositors following this method to arrive at an interpretation of prophecy that fits historic fulfillment. The problem is large and deserving of the attention of all really interested in arriving at a true interpretation of the Scriptures.

Dallas, Texas

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 3

### Part 3: Amillennialism in the Ancient Church

[Author's Note: The present article is the first of a series of studies in amillennialism which will form a background for later articles on premillennialism.]

In recent years interest has been revived in the origin of millennial theology. This has been caused, first by the decadence of postmillennialism which seemed to demand a new search for perspective in this field; second, by the popularity of premillennialism with its claim that the early church was premillennial; and, third, by the trend toward more serious Biblical studies—a result of the decline of extreme liberalism. The reduction of millennial theories to only two principal viewpoints—amillennial and premillennial—has tended to simplify the issue and make the millennial argument largely one for or against a literal millennium.

The nature of the arguments bearing on the millennium has also been significant. These have been characterized by: (1) a fresh study of literature of the Fathers to see if it is necessary to concede that the ancient church was premillennial, as had previously been almost universally allowed by all parties; (2) a fresh study of the Scriptures by the amillennialists to defend themselves from the obvious Biblical approach of premillennialists; (3) a more vigorous attack on premillennialism with a view to proving its doctrines dangerous and heretical to orthodox theology as a whole. Many of the significant books in the controversy have come from the pens of amillennialists, and these books in turn are refutations of earlier books of the premillennialists. Of particular interest is the recent restudy of millennialism in the ancient church with the objective of destroying or at least weakening the weighty argument of premillennialists that the ancient church was in sympathy with their viewpoints. That would seem similar to the modern amillennial method while at the same time subscribing to the idea of a coming kingdom on earth to follow the second advent—which is essentially premillennial. It is this factor that has occasioned considerable controversy in recent years and which needs further evaluation. In attempting to trace millennialism in the ancient church, one is faced with many difficulties if all facts are weighed impartially. The voice of the early centuries must be examined, however, not because it is decisive in itself, but because it throws some light on how the early church interpreted the Scriptures themselves. The recent renewed investigation of the available ancient sources with the claimed support for ancient amillennialism is of particular importance to the present study.

### Amillennialism in the First Century

For most sober students of the Scriptures, the basic question in regard to the millennium is whether the Bible itself teaches decisively one view or the other. For the present discussion we can disregard that form of modern liberalism which might admit that the New Testament taught essentially the principal doctrines of premillennialism but pushes it aside as an error on the part of the apostles. It is assumed here that the New Testament is correct and the problem is not one of inspiration. In other words, is the New Testament as well as the Old premillennial or amillennial? The formal consideration of this question is impossible within reasonable limits. Either view requires an interpretation and harmonization of the entire volume of Scripture to sustain it completely. It may be said, however, that the New Testament bears no record whatever of a millennial dispute. While the early church was concerned over many doctrinal questions, no disputes on this issue are recorded.

The question of the disciples, “Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6), occasioned no denial from the Lord Jesus, but merely the reminder that it was not for them to know the “time.” The request of the mother of James and John for preferment of her sons in the kingdom was not refused on the ground that no future earthly kingdom

was in prospect, but that the places of honor were reserved for those chosen by the Father (Matt 20:20-23). While the argument from silence is never decisive, Christ also told His disciples, "If it were not so I would have told you" (John 14:2). If no earthly kingdom was in prospect, it seems strange also in view of the prevailing Jewish concept of an earthly kingdom that Christ should tell His disciples, "I appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father has appointed unto me; that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:29-30). The positive testimony of Revelation 20 with its six references to a reign of Christ on earth for one thousand years while hotly disputed and denied significance by the amillennialists is nevertheless their stubborn foe. These references to the millennial doctrine are at least more than straws in the wind. If the amillennial viewpoint as held in modern times is correct, it would have called for extensive correction of the prevailing idea among the Jews that an earthly kingdom was their Messianic prospect.

Leaving for later discussion the basic problem of Scriptural interpretation, the question remains as to what positive evidence there is for amillennialism in the first century. The question assumes considerable proportions inasmuch as George N. H. Peters lists fifteen advocates of premillennialism for the first century indicated as such outside the Scriptures themselves.[3] George N. H. Peters, *Theocratic Kingdom*, I, 494-95. While some of these no doubt would be disputed by amillennialists, all concede that Papias (80-163), who seems to have been intimate with John the Apostle and Polycarp, was premillennial if we may believe Irenaeus who was a pupil of Polycarp. What can the amillennialists offer in support of the antiquity of amillennialism?

It is not difficult to find claims from amillennialists on the antiquity of their view. Ira D. Landis states flatly, "Jesus and the apostles were Amillennial in their eschatology." [4] Ira D. Landis, *The Faith of Our Fathers on Eschatology*, p. 369. His proof for this in his chapter on the history of millennialism is limited to one paragraph which states that Christ opposed Pharisees and that Pharisees were premillennialists; therefore Christ was an amillennialist. Landis ignores the opposition of Christ to Sadducees who were probably amillennial. In his discussion which follows in which he depreciates everyone claimed to be premillennial, the only extra-Biblical proof is that he cites Barnabas as not being premillennial among first century writers. The classification of Barnabas, as we will see, is at present hotly disputed though he has long been considered premillennial. Landis decides the argument in one sentence: "The epistle ascribed to Barnabas is not Premillennial as is claimed, but decidedly anti-Judaistic." [5] *Ibid.*, p. 370.

Other amillennial writers who are more objective in their scholarship seem to have nothing more to suggest than that the testimony of Barnabas is not conclusive in its support of the premillennial viewpoint. Louis Berkhof while claiming that half the church Fathers were amillennial during the second and third centuries (without offering any proof) does not even suggest that this was true in the first century. [6] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 708. According to the amillennialists themselves evidence for amillennialism in the first century is reduced, then, to the disputed testimony of Barnabas. Over against this is the undisputed fact that Papias and others were definitely premillennial in this same period. As the case of Barnabas is the only available evidence for amillennialism according to the amillennialists themselves, a brief examination of his testimony will be made.

Kromminga who gives the testimony of Barnabas lengthy consideration points out that Barnabas in chapter IV of his Epistle subscribes to the interpretation that the Roman empire is the fourth of the empires of Daniel. [7] Kromminga, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31. This seems to imply that Barnabas thought the coming of the Lord was near for he refers to the fact that "the final stumbling-block approaches..." [8] Cited by Kromminga, *ibid.*, p. 31. Kromminga further cites chapter XV of the *Epistle of Barnabas* as being the main passage in point: "Attend, my children, to the meaning of this expression: 'He finished in six days.' This implies, that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with Him a thousand years. And He Himself testifieth, saying: 'Behold, today will be a thousand years.' Therefore, my children, in six days, that is, in six thousand years, all things will be finished. 'And He rested on the seventh day.' This meaneth: when His Son, coming shall destroy the time (of wicked man) and judge the ungodly and change the sun and the moon and the stars, then shall He truly rest on the seventh day." [9] Kromminga, *ibid.*, p. 31.

Barnabas seems to teach from this passage that the present age starting from creation will be completed in six thousand years—a common if unwarranted teaching. Of importance is his statement that "His Son" will come at the end of six thousand years, destroy the wicked, judge the ungodly, change the sun, moon, and stars, and then rest on the seventh day, *i.e.*, for a thousand years. The plain implication that Christ will come before the final one thousand years has been taken almost

universally to be a representation of a premillennial advent. Gibbon who was an infidel and totally impartial toward the millennial controversy interprets Barnabas (apparently) as follows: “The ancient and popular doctrine of the millennium was intimately connected with the Second Coming of Christ. As the works of creation had been finished in six days their duration in the present state, according to tradition, was fixed to six thousand years. By the same analogy it was inferred that this long period of labor and contention, which was now almost elapsed, would be succeeded by a joyful Sabbath of a thousand years, and that Christ with His triumphant band of the saints and the elect who had escaped death, or who had been miraculously revived, would reign upon the earth till the time appointed for the last and general resurrection...the reigning sentiment of the orthodox believers.”[10] “Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, I, 532.

Not only impartial historians but also many amillennialists concede that this passage indicates Barnabas is properly classed as a premillennialist. Albertus Pieters, a longtime foe of premillennialism, in his series of articles in the *Calvin Forum* (August-September, 1938) agrees that both Papias and Barnabas are premillennial. W. H. Rutgers who attacks premillennialism without reserve nevertheless finds Barnabas merely doubtful but not clear.[11] *Premillennialism in America* (Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, Goes, Holland, 1930), p. 55. Landis as we have seen dismissed Barnabas as a premillennarian, but made no claim that he was amillennial. Only Kromminga of all authors consulted seems to believe that Barnabas is an amillennarian.

The contribution of the late D. H. Kromminga to the millennial controversy is one of the curious aspects of the current argument. Kromminga classifies himself as premillennarian because he finds it necessary to interpret millennial passages literally. It is evident from his writings, however, that he is more concerned in maintaining the tenets of covenant theology than of premillennialism, and his denominational and associational relationships were predominantly amillennial. His works on the millennium are so obviously catering to amillennial arguments that apart from the facts he presents the value of his argument is often stultified. In his discussion of Barnabas he labors for many pages to classify Barnabas as amillennial, and his entire chapter on the “Extent of Ancient Chiliasm” is devoted to it. His argument concedes that Barnabas is not a postmillennarian. Kromminga finds, however, in the spiritual interpretation and application which Barnabas makes of Exodus 33:3, Ezekiel 47:12 and Zephaniah 3:19, that his method is figurative interpretation, which he thinks is typical amillennialism.[12] Kromminga, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-38. This is at best an argument that Barnabas is not a consistent premillennarian, but it certainly does nothing to negative his positive statements. Certainly modern premillennarians make a similar use of the Old Testament in typology and spiritual applications without denying the basic method of literal interpretation which is the basis for premillennialism.

About the only notable contribution of Kromminga in his entire discussion is his reference to the fact that Barnabas evidently believed in the judgment of the wicked at the second, premillennial advent rather than at the end of the millennium. Kromminga infers this contradicts the usual premillennial view.[13] *Ibid.*, p. 32. What Kromminga himself overlooks is that Barnabas does not say that the wicked are raised from the dead. Judging from the context, Barnabas is stating merely that the living wicked are judged “when His Son, coming, shall destroy the time (of the wicked man) and judge the ungodly...”[14] *Ibid.*, p. 31. Barnabas merely leaves out any statement about how the millennium will end. Even if Kromminga is right, however, it again would indicate only a variation rather than a denial of premillennialism. As far as making a positive contribution in favor of amillennialism, Barnabas has nothing to offer. The overwhelming testimony of reputable scholars has been for many years that Barnabas is properly a premillennialist, and it should be borne in mind that the literary evidence is entirely unchanged. The current attack on Barnabas is of recent origin and arises from the desire to shrink the historical basis of premillennialism rather than from an impartial and objective study of the evidence.

It may be concluded, therefore, that the first century is barren of any real support to the amillennial viewpoint. While, indeed, the evidence is not altogether clear and not abundant for this century, it is significant that amillennial polemics have contented themselves with minimizing premillennial claims without attempting to support their own view by historical evidence. The first century is a lost cause for amillennialism.

## **Amillennialism in the Second and Third Century**

The second century like the first is devoid of any testimony whatever for amillennialism except at its close. To be sure

Rutgers states with enthusiasm, “Chiliasm found no favor with the best of the Apostolic Fathers, nor does it find support in the unknown writer of the Epistle to Diognetus.... We find no trace of the teaching in Athenagoras, Theophilus, Tatian, Hegesippus, Dionysius of Corinth, Melito of Sardis or in Apollinaris of Hierapolis.”[15] W. H. Rutgers, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

This is an astounding confession. Rutgers’ evidence for amillennialism is that a whole century rolls by with no voice lifted against premillennialism. He concludes that chiliasm found no favor! If Peters is right, there were many premillennialists in their era, including some whom Rutgers believes have no trace of millennial teaching. Peters lists Pothinus, Justin Martyr, Melito, Hegesippus, Tatian, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Apollinaris as second century premillennialists.[16] G. N. H. Peters, *op. cit.*, I, 495-96.

The best that the most ardent amillennialist can do in the first two centuries, then, is to claim the disputed Barnabas and hide behind the apparent silence of many of the Fathers. If amillennialism was the prevailing view of the church during this period we are left without sources or evidence.

The acknowledged lack of evidence for amillennialism in the second century is all the more remarkable because amillennialists are making so much in our day of the comparatively few evidences for premillennialism. If premillennialists are wrong for building upon such evidence as has been discovered—much of it almost beyond dispute in support of early belief in the millennial reign of Christ, what is the case for amillennialism which has no evidence at all which is undisputed? For 150 years after the crucifixion of Christ, the amillennialists have only one disputed exponent of amillennialist character—Barnabas—who is commonly conceded by many amillennialists and most neutral scholars to be premillennial. Such is the void that faces those seeking evidence for amillennialism.

At the very close of the second century and the beginning of the third we come upon the first bona fide amillennialists, Gaius (or, Caius) who wrote early in the third century; Clement of Alexandria, a teacher at the school there from 193 to 220; his pupil, Origen (185-254); and Dionysius (190-265). It was from these men that premillennialism suffered its first vocal and effective opposition. The nature of this opposition, its exegetical grounds, and the effect upon premillennialism are all significant.

Most of what we know about Gaius comes from other sources which are very much opposed to premillennialism. It is probable that he is properly classed as an amillenarian. The nature of the teachings of Clement and Origen are, however, well established and their ground for opposition to premillennialism is very significant.

The allegorizing method of interpreting Scripture which Kromminga attempted to find in Barnabas is clearly evident in Clement. Rutgers in his refutation of premillennialism shows little enthusiasm for the basis of Clement’s argument: “Clement, engrossed and charmed by Greek philosophy, applied this erroneous allegorical method to Holy Writ. It was a one-sided emphasis: opposed to the real, the visible, phenomenal, spacial and temporal. A Platonic idealistic philosophy could not countenance carnalistic, sensualistic conceptions of the future as that advanced by chiliasm. It shook the very foundation on which chiliasm rested. Robertson observed that ‘it loosed its [chiliasm’s] sheet-anchor,—naive literalism in the interpretation of Scripture.’”[17] W. H. Rutgers, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

The work of Origen, if anything, was worse than Clement who was his teacher. No doctrine was safe from his use of the allegorical method, even the doctrine of resurrection. His method subverted the plain meaning of Scripture by a principle of interpretation so subjective that the interpreter could make what he willed from the written revelation. It was natural that one who opposed literal interpretation of Scripture in other realms should do the same in regard to the millennium. The influence and place of Origen is well-known and beyond question, and his hermeneutical method is repudiated at least in part by all modern scholars.

Dionysius who was Bishop of Alexandria in the latter part of the third century is noted for his controversy resulting from the teachings of Nepos, an ardent premillennialist, who as bishop had taught and written with such effectiveness that whole churches were withdrawing in protest against the spiritualization of Origen. Eusebius who gives the account (Chapter 24 of his *Church History*) describes a three-day conference held by Dionysius in which the matter was thoroughly discussed with

the result that the schism was healed.[18] Cf. D. H. Kromminga, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-63. Nepos had died sometime previous to the conference.

With the close of the third century, the evidence indicates a distinct increase in power in amillennialism and a corresponding loss of power for the premillennialists. In the church, it is clear that the rising tide of amillennialism comes almost entirely from the Alexandrian school, in particular, from Clement, Origen, and Dionysius, all of this locality. Accompanying this change in the church was the corresponding political change under Constantine which became effective more and more in the fourth century. With the coming of Augustine a new day and a new chapter in the history of millennialism was written.

*BSac* 106:423 (Jul 49) p. 302

Before considering the great influence of Augustine, which seems to have dominated the church for centuries afterward, it is necessary to recapitulate and evaluate the sources of amillennialism thus far discovered. In the first two centuries, only the disputed testimony of Barnabas can be cited. With the close of the second century and continuing through the third, a new foe to premillennialism arose in the Alexandrian school of interpretation. Its roots were in Platonic philosophy and in keeping with it the literal and plain meaning of Scripture was sacrificed for allegorical interpretations often of a most fanciful kind. Premillennialism was attacked then, not as a teaching unwarranted by the Word of God, but rather because it was a literal interpretation of it. The method used against premillennialism was unfortunately used against other major doctrines of Christianity with devastating effect. In their doctrines of the person of Christ, of sin, of salvation, and of eschatology the evil results of the allegorical method are easily traced. It was to this foe of proper interpretation of Scripture that premillennialism owed its decline. It may be concluded, then, that amillennialism in the first three centuries rests for the most part on silence, on one disputed representative in the first century, none in the second, and a fallacious and destructive principle of interpretation in the third century.

Dallas, Texas

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 4

### Part 4: Amillennialism from Augustine to Modern Times

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of Augustine in the history of theology. Not only did his thinking crystallize the theology which preceded him, but to a large extent he laid the foundations for both Catholic and Protestant doctrine. B. B. Warfield, quoting Harnack, refers to Augustine as “incomparably the greatest man whom, ‘between Paul the Apostle and Luther the Reformer, the Christian Church has possessed.’”[1] B. B. Warfield, *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine*, p. 114, citing in part Harnack, *Monasticism and the Confessions of St. Augustine*, p. 123. While the contribution of Augustine is principally noted in the areas of the doctrine of the church, hamartiology, the doctrine of grace, and predestination, he is also the greatest landmark in the early history of amillennialism.

The importance of Augustine to the history of amillennialism is derived from two reasons. First, there are no acceptable exponents of amillennialism before Augustine, as has been previously discussed. Prior to Augustine, amillennialism was associated with the heresies produced by the allegorizing and spiritualizing school of theology at Alexandria which not only opposed premillennialism but subverted any literal exegesis of Scripture whatever. Few modern theologians even of liberal schools of thought would care to build upon the theology of such men as Clement of Alexandria, Origen or Dionysius. Augustine is, then, the first theologian of solid influence who adopted amillennialism.

The second reason for the importance of Augustinian amillennialism is that his viewpoint became the prevailing doctrine of the Roman Church, and it was adopted with variations by most of the Protestant Reformers along with many other teachings of Augustine. The writings of Augustine, in fact, occasioned the shelving of premillennialism by most of the organized church. The study of Augustine on the millennial question is a necessary introduction to the doctrine as a whole.

In the current discussion of the millennial question the restudy of Augustine is especially *apropos*. Here we have one of the first great theologians of the Roman Church recognized by both Catholic and Protestant as an original thinker and solid contributor to the doctrine of Christendom. The fact that Augustine was amillennial in his viewpoint is noted with pride by modern amillennialists to show that their position is historic and a part of the central teaching of the church. Allis, for instance, loses no time in his attack on premillennialism to point out in the second page of his volume that Augustinian amillennialism was the norm for the church of the middle ages.[2] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, pp. 2-5. While the significance of much of the material relating to the millennium in writers before Augustine is hotly debated, Augustine is perfectly clear in his position—the general facts of his position are not disputed. We have then concrete teaching which can be treated objectively.

In the previous study in postmillennialism, the current decline of postmillennialism was traced to certain specific factors: (1) its principle of spiritualizing the meaning of Scripture; (2) its trend toward liberalism; (3) its failure to fit the facts of history; (4) a trend toward realism in philosophy; (5) the present trend toward amillennialism. As postmillennialism is suitable for a test case for the principles of the millennial issue as a whole, so Augustinian amillennialism is suitable as a test case for amillennialism. In other words, does the viewpoint of Augustine demonstrate a proper method of interpreting Scripture? Does it provide a basis for liberalism? Does it fit the facts of history? Does it fit the trend of modern thought? While all of these questions are not decisive, it is clear that the question of method of interpreting Scripture, relation to liberalism and fulfillment in history are important bases for judgment of Augustine’s views on the millennium. It is proposed to take his doctrine, which is considered normative amillennialism, and make it a test for the doctrine as a whole.

## Augustine on the Millennium

Augustine's concept of the millennium is not difficult to grasp nor are the major facts subject to dispute, Augustine conceived of the present age as a conflict between the City of God and the City of Satan, or the conflict between the church and the world. This was viewed as moving on to the ultimate triumph of the church to be climaxed by a tremendous struggle in which the church would be apparently defeated, only to consummate in a tremendous triumph in the second coming of Christ to the earth. Augustine held that the present age of conflict is the millennium. Following as he did the chronology of the LXX which is somewhat longer than Ussher's chronology in the Old Testament, he found that the Christian era is the sixth millennium from creation. This age apparently began somewhat before Christ, according to chronology, but Satan in any case was bound, as Allis states, during the lifetime of Christ on earth (Luke 10:18).[3] Allis, *ibid.*, p. 3, "He held that the binding of Satan took place during the earthly ministry of our Lord (Lk. x.18)." Augustine puts it, "This binding of Satan began when the church began to spread from Judaea into other regions, and lasts yet, and shall do until his time be expired." [4] Augustine, *City of God*, XX, 8. Augustine considered the progress of the millennium in his day (400 A.D.) well advanced and predicted the consummation would occur in the year 650.[5] Cf. Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 3. Augustine, however, qualified his datesetting. He states: "In vain therefore do we try to reckon the remainder of the world's years.... Some say that, it shall last four hundred, some five hundred, some a thousand years after the ascension. Everyone has his view, it were vain to try to show on what grounds." [6] Augustine, *op. cit.*, XVIII, 53.

Augustine's interpretation of Revelation 20 is not very specific. As in his entire discussion of this doctrine, the treatment is cursory and brief. He discusses Revelation 20 in three or four pages and dismisses without any real argument the literal view. In fact, Augustine, like many others, does not seem to grasp the principles involved. His reason for avoiding the literal view is reduced to one reason—some had made the millennium a time of carnal enjoyment, a view which Augustine rightly opposed. As Augustine himself put it: "This opinion [a future literal millenium after the resurrection] might be allowed, if it proposed only spiritual delight unto the saints during this space (and we were once of the same opinion ourselves); but seeing the avouchers hereof affirm that the saints after this resurrection shall do nothing but revel in fleshly banquets, where the cheer shall exceed both modesty and measure, this is gross and fit for none but carnal men to believe. But they that are really and truly spiritual do call those of this opinion Chiliasts." [7] Augustine, *ibid.*, XX, 7. Thus on trivial grounds Augustine abandons the literal interpretation of Revelation 20. Somehow, for all his genius, he did not see that he could abandon this false teaching without abandoning the doctrine of a literal millennium.

In spite of adopting a spiritualized interpretation of Revelation 20, Augustine hews closely to a literal interpretation of the time element—it would be a literal 1000 years. Instead of a future millennium however, he considered it already present. Revelation 20 was, then, a recapitulation of the present age which Augustine held was portrayed in the earlier chapters of Revelation. The present age, for Augustine, is the millennium promised in Revelation 20. Augustine, however, also held to a future millennium, to round out the seven millenniums from Adam which he held comprised the history of man. This future millennium, he held, was not literal but is synonymous with eternity—a use of the number in a symbolic sense only.

In Augustine, then, we have specific and concrete teaching on the millennium.[8] Cf. Augustine, *ibid.*, XX; Allis, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-5; D. H. Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church*, pp. 108-113. There is no future millennium in the ordinary meaning of the term. The present age is the millennium; Satan is bound now; when Christ returns the present millennium will close, the future millennium or eternity will begin. It remains, now, to test this teaching in its principles, implications, and fulfillment.

## The Principle of Spiritualized Interpretation

It is clear that in arriving at his conclusion regarding the millennium Augustine used the principle of spiritualizing Scripture freely. While he did not use this principle in interpreting Scripture relating to predestination, hamartiology, salvation, or grace, he found it suitable for interpreting prophecy. A candid examination of his interpretation leaves the examiner with the impression that Augustine did not give a reasonable exegesis of Scripture involved. Augustine's doctrine that Satan is bound in this age—an essential of his system of interpretation—is a notable illustration of spiritualized and strained exegesis (cf. Luke 10:18 and Revelation 20:2-3). Nothing is clearer from Scripture, the history of the church, and Christian experience

than that Satan is exceedingly active in this present age against both Christians and unbelievers. Ananias is declared to have his heart filled with Satan (Acts 5:3). The one to be disciplined in the Corinthian church is delivered unto Satan (1 Cor 5:5; cf. 1 Tim 1:20). The Christian is constantly warned against Satan's temptations (1 Cor 7:5; 2 Cor 2:11; 11:14 ; etc.). Paul declares that he is sorely tried by the buffeting of the messenger of Satan (2 Cor 12:7). While the Christian can have victory over Satan, there is no evidence whatever that Satan is inactive or bound. It is no wonder that Warfield, though a disciple of Augustine, completely abandons this idea of Augustine as far as earth is concerned and limits it to the idea that "saints described are removed from the sphere of Satan's assaults,"[9] B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines*, p. 651. i.e., Satan is bound in respect to heaven only. While Warfield's explanation is no more sensible than Augustine's as far as an exegesis of the Scriptures is concerned, it at least accords with the facts of church history. It can be stated flatly that Augustine's exegesis is an outright error as far as the binding of Satan is concerned.

The exegesis of Augustine on Revelation 20 as a whole fares no better. After concluding that the binding of Satan is synonymous with the victory of Christ in His first advent, he draws the strained conclusion that the "first resurrection" of Revelation 20:5 is the spiritual birth of believers. The context in Revelation 20:4 makes it perfectly clear that as far as this passage goes those who are "raised" are those who "were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads." The subject of the passage is not the living but the dead; not the church as a whole, but the martyrs only. To spiritualize this portion of Scripture to make it conform to the course of the present age is to destroy all its plain literary meaning. Augustine's view required also, of course, the spiritualization of the many Old Testament passages bearing on the future righteous kingdom on earth, and this he does in his treatment of the Old Testament.

## **Augustine's Concept of the Present Age**

It is central to Augustine's theology that he regards the church as ultimately triumphant. While his viewpoint varies somewhat from postmillennial theology, the similarities are so marked that some have taken Augustine to be postmillennial. Like the postmillennialist, Augustine regarded the present age as a progressive triumph culminating in the second advent and the final judgment of men. He differed from the postmillennialists only in matter of the degree of that triumph. As Augustine held the millennium was already three-fourths past when he lived, he found it necessary to account for the widespread evidence of sin in his day and the comparative inadequacy of the church to bring in a golden age of righteousness. He accordingly did not claim that the present age was a literal fulfillment of the promised age of righteousness, but was rather a time of conflict in which evil often seemed to have the upper hand. Like the postmillenarians, however, he did not doubt that ultimately righteousness would triumph.

While Augustine's predictions of continued struggle and conflict have been abundantly fulfilled to the present day, there is little evidence that there has been any progress toward the ultimate goal. It is significant that many present-day amillennialists have further retreated from the predictions of triumph and are content to leave a golden age to eternity future or limited to heaven. Premillennialists will not necessarily disagree with Augustine's basic idea of conflict in the present age nor with the idea that the second advent will signal the coming of righteousness to the earth, but they will attach a different meaning to both the present age and the second advent.

## **The Failure of Fulfillment**

The test of any system of interpretation is its correspondence to the facts of history. This is especially true in interpretation of prophecy. The question may fairly be asked whether the history of the church and the world since Augustine has given any confirmation of the essentials of his interpretation.

The Augustinian concept of the binding of Satan has already been shown to be without Scriptural or historical warrant. Certainly there has been no real change in the working of Satan in the world and plainly no lack of activity of Satanic forces. The concept of progress and a triumphant church, while not stressed by Augustine in the postmillennial way, falls far short of fulfillment or even significant attainment. The Christian era has been no golden age of righteousness nor has the church conquered the world. It is more accurate to recognize that the world has to a large degree possessed the church.

One feature of Augustinian millennialism has notably failed. Augustine, as has been previously brought out, considered the coming of Christ within one thousand years after the ascension an essential of his system. So impressed was Augustine with the necessity of interpreting literally the six references to the one thousand years in Revelation 20 that he departed from his otherwise spiritualization of the passage to assert it. Because of his involvement with the theory that the entire history of man would be finished within seven millenniums, he considered it entirely possible that the sixth millennium, the last in ordinary world history, had already begun when Christ was born. Based on calculations from chronology of the LXX, Augustine concluded that the second advent would occur in the year 650 A.D.[10] Cf. Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 3. This would seem the most flagrant date-setting one could imagine. In fairness to Augustine, however, it should be said that he is not arbitrary and recognized the possibility of error in the system of chronology which he followed. At the outside, nevertheless, the second advent would certainly occur within one thousand years of the ascension.[11] Augustine, *op. cit.*, XVIII, 53. Augustine was positive that in any case the millennium was started no later than the ascension and would last no longer than one thousand years.

The year 650 came and went with no notable events to fulfill the promise in Augustine's teaching. Attention was soon fastened on the year 1000 A.D. The belief was widespread that the second advent would occur on this date. As Kromminga points out, not only at the year 1000, but also in the year 1044, and again in 1065, when Good Friday happened to coincide with the Day of Annunciation, there was hope that the second advent would occur on Good Friday.[12] Kromminga, *op. cit.*, p. 117, citing Glaber, Erdmann, etc. The expectation of the church based on Augustinian eschatology was not fulfilled, and it became evident that by no stretch of the imagination was the Augustinian teaching to be considered fulfilled. For a time they could hope they were in the "little season" (Rev 20:3), but as the years wore away this became increasingly untenable. Both of Augustine's suggestions—the year 650 and the year 1000 or thereafter—were obsolete.

Two major viewpoints eventuated out of the welter of speculation which continued to regard the coming of Christ as an imminent event. The postmillennial idea that the millennium was literal but would begin someday after the time of Christ had many adherents. All sorts of starting points were suggested. Even to modern times postmillennialists were wont to start the millennium at such time as to bring its consummation in their lifetime. Hengstenberg, for instance, began the millennium in the ninth century, which would bring the second advent in his lifetime. Others began the millennium in more recent times. Allis cites Durham as dating its beginning in 1560.[13] Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 4. Normal postmillennialism follows Whitby, however, in finding the entire millennium or golden age still future. Both Roman Catholic and Reformed scholars were in total confusion as far as arriving at an agreed teaching on this matter. A popular and more tenable position was adopted by some who spiritualized the time element of the millennium along with the teachings which relate to it. Undoubtedly this is a more consistent position even if it leaves the passage indefinite. In any case the outstanding feature of Augustinian amillennialism which captured the church and caused the eclipse of premillennialism proved to be a total failure in the history of the church. There was absolutely nothing to confirm the Augustinian view of the millennium in the centuries which followed him. If the law of fulfillment is essential to establish an interpretation, the Augustinian view is tried and found wanting.

## **The Amillennialism of the Protestant Reformation**

The Roman Church did not make any significant advance in the doctrine after Augustine, and Protestant teachings did not fare much better. Without attempting within the limited discussion possible here an analysis of the whole Protestant Reformation, it is safe to conclude that the early years of Protestantism saw little if any advance over the Augustinian view. It is clear that the great Protestant leaders such as Calvin, Luther, and Melancthon are properly classed as amillennial. As far as millennial teaching was concerned, they were content to follow the Roman Church in a weakened Augustinian viewpoint. Calvin's discussion of the millennium is a fair sample of the attitude of the Reformers. They treated the doctrine superficially and arbitrarily, making the view ridiculous by misrepresentation. Calvin, for instance, has this to say: "...not long after arose the Millenarians, who limited the reign of Christ to a thousand years. Their fiction is too puerile to require or deserve refutation. Nor does the Revelation, which they quote in favour of their error, afford them any support; for the term of a thousand years, there mentioned, refers not to the eternal blessedness of the Church, but to the various agitations which awaited the Church in its militant state upon earth. But the whole Scripture proclaims that there will be no end of the

happiness of the elect, or the punishment of the reprobate.... Those who assign the children of God a thousand years to enjoy the inheritance of the future life, little think what dishonour they cast on Christ and his kingdom.”[14] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), II, 250-51 (Book III, 25). While Augustine discarded premillennialism because he took a carnal interpretation of the millennium as essential to the view, Calvin commits a greater error in assigning to the premillennial view a limited eternity of one millennium. Neither view would be claimed by any thinking premillennialist of our day. One can wonder what Augustine and Calvin would do with the complete system of premillennial teaching available in modern times.

## Modern Amillennialism

Because of the analytic treatment of amillennialism from a modern viewpoint, which will follow, it will be sufficient here to observe the broad trend of amillennialism in modern times. For the most part amillennialists of today such as Allis and Berkhof claim to follow in the hallowed tradition of Augustine while admitting the need for adjustment of his view to the actual modern situation. A new type of amillennialism has arisen, however, of which Warfield can be taken as an example which is actually a totally new type of amillennialism. Allis traces this view to Duesterdieck (1859) and Kliefoth (1874)[15] Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 5. and analyzes it as a reversal of the fundamental Augustinian theory that Revelation 20 was a recapitulation of the church age. The new view instead follows the line of teaching that the millennium is distinct from the church age though it precedes the second advent. To solve the problem of correlation of this interpretation with the hard facts of a world of unbelief and sin, they interpreted the millennium as a picture not of a time-period but of a state of blessedness of the saints in heaven.[16] Allis, *loc. cit.* Warfield, with the acknowledged help of Kliefoth,[17] Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines*, pp. 643-44. defines the millennium in these words: “The vision, in one word, is a vision of the peace of those who have died in the Lord; and its message to us is embodied in the words of XIV.13: ‘Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, from henceforth’—of which passage the present is indeed only an expansion. The picture that is brought before us here is, in fine, the picture of the ‘intermediate state’—of the saints of God gathered in heaven away from the confused noise and garments bathed in blood that characterize the war upon earth, in order that they may securely await the end.”[18] Warfield, *ibid.*, p. 649.

Among amillennialists who are classified as conservative, there are, then, two principal viewpoints: (1) which finds fulfillment in the present age on earth in the church; (2) which finds fulfillment in heaven in the saints. The second more than the first requires spiritualization not only of Revelation 20 but of all the many Old Testament passages dealing with a golden age of a righteous kingdom on earth.

Such are the antecedents of modern amillennialism. It remains, now, to analyze this historic doctrine in its modern setting in the light of the Holy Scriptures. Both premillennialism and amillennialism have many honored and historic exponents. The question remains which view provides the best interpretation of the entire Word of God. Obviously the Scriptures do not teach both viewpoints; obviously this is not a trivial matter. The contemporary serious trend of studies in this direction while not always pure in motive finds justification in the significance of the question. What, after all, is the answer of amillennialism to the main issues of Christian doctrine? This is the question which is now to come before us.

Dallas, Texas

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 5

### Part 5: Amillennialism as a Method of Interpretation

{Editor's note: Footnotes in the original printed edition were numbered 18-30, but in this electronic edition are numbered 1-13 respectively.}

#### The Issue

There is a growing realization in the theological world that the crux of the millennial issue is the question of *method* of interpreting Scripture. Premillenarians follow the so-called 'grammatical-historical' literal interpretation while amillenarians use a spiritualizing method. As Albertus Pieters, an avowed amillennialist, writes concerning the problem as a whole, "The question whether the Old Testament prophecies concerning the people of God must be interpreted in their ordinary sense, as other Scriptures are interpreted, or can properly be applied to the Christian Church, is called the question of spiritualization of prophecy. This is one of the major problems in biblical interpretation, and confronts everyone who makes a serious study of the Word of God. It is one of the chief keys to the difference of opinion between Premillenarians and the mass of Christian scholars. The former reject such spiritualization, the latter employ it; and as long as there is no agreement on this point the debate is interminable and fruitless." [1] Albertus Pieters, *The Leader*, September 5, 1934, as cited by Gerrit H. Hospers, *The Principle of Spiritualization in Hermeneutics* (East Williamson, N.Y., published by the author, 1935), p. 5. The issue, then, between amillennialism and premillennialism is their respective methods of interpretation, and little progress can be made in the study of the millennial issue until this aspect is analyzed and understood.

#### The Popularity of the Amillennial Method

It is quite apparent that the amillennial method of interpretation of Scripture which involves spiritualization has achieved a considerable popularity. It is not too difficult to account for the widespread approval of the spiritualizing method adopted by many conservative theologians as well as liberal and Roman Catholic expositors. Fundamentally its charm lies in its flexibility. The interpreter can change the literal and grammatical sense of Scripture to make it coincide with his own system of interpretation. The conservative and liberal and Roman Catholic can each claim that the Bible does not contradict his concept of theology. It is this very factor, however, which raises grave doubts concerning the legitimacy of a method which produces such diverse systems of interpretation. One of the major difficulties of amillennialism both as a system of theology and as a method of interpretation is that it has never achieved unity on the very essentials of Biblical truth. In the studies which follow this will have many illustrations.

It is significant that the first successful opposition to premillennialism came from the adoption of a spiritualizing principle of interpretation. The Alexandrian school of theology which came into prominence about 300 A.D. followed a principle of interpretation which regarded all Scripture as an allegory. They succeeded in arousing a considerable opposition to premillenarians of their days even if it was at the price of subverting not only the millennial doctrine but all other Christian doctrine as well. It remained for Augustine to give a more moderate application of this principle of interpretation. In general, he held that only prophecy should be spiritualized and that in the historical and doctrinal sections of Scripture the 'historical-grammatical' literal method should be used. This was a decided improvement as far as theology as a whole was concerned, even if it left the millennial issue unsolved and at the mercy of the allegorical school. Because of the weight of Augustine in other major issues of theology where he was in the main correct, Augustine became the model for the Protestant Reformers who accepted his amillennialism along with his other teachings.

It is quite clear from the literature of the Reformation that the millennial issue was never handled fairly or given any considered study. The basic issues of the Reformation involved the right of private interpretation of the Scriptures, the individual priesthood of all believers, the doctrine of justification by faith, and similar truths. It was natural for the emphasis to rest in this area, and for eschatology as found in the Roman Church to be corrected only in denial of purgatory and other teachings which were regarded as inventions. It was natural to accept Roman teachings where the error was not patent. Premillennialism at the time of the Reformation unfortunately was expounded chiefly by small groups of somewhat fanatical enthusiasts who were often discredited by extreme doctrines.

Because amillennialism was adopted by the Reformers, it achieved a quality of orthodoxy to which its modern adherents can point with pride. They could rightly claim many worthy scholars in the succession from the Reformation to modern times such as Calvin, Luther, Melancthon, and in modern times, Warfield, Vos, Kuyper, Machen, and Berkhof. If one follows traditional Reformed theology in many other respects, it is natural to accept its amillennialism. The weight of organized Christianity has largely been on the side of amillennialism.

Many other factors increase the prestige of amillennialism. As a system of doctrine it enhances the church as an institution, a continuance of God's administrative government. This strengthens the power of ecclesiasticism. The simplicity of the amillennial eschatology has a strong appeal as a way of unifying the many elements indicated in a literal interpretation of Scripture. It tends also to concentrate attention upon present problems and practical truth. Amillennarians do not need to hold prophetic conferences and preach often on prophetic themes. It is comparatively easy to grasp a simple formula of final resurrection, final judgment, and eternal state, and not to attempt to harmonize hundreds of verses in Scripture which give details of the future.

Amillennarians can also claim, with some ambiguity, that they are aiming at a spiritual interpretation of Scripture—meaning by this, its ultimate practical meaning rather than its literal sense. On the whole it is not difficult to explain the charm of amillennialism which has appealed to scholar and layman alike. One can understand the psychological reasons which dismiss premillennialism as an impractical and contradictory amassing of details of prophecy and the study of prophecy itself as fruitless and confusing.

While the popularity of amillennialism is therefore easily accounted for, the very nature of this popularity raises some serious questions. It is quite apparent in the literature of amillennialism that both in its historic origin and its modern discussion amillennarians are quite unwilling to face squarely the problems of their own system. Only under the goading of scholarly premillennial works and the tremendous acclaim of premillennialism in the Bible study movements of recent centuries have amillennarians been willing to back up and to consider formally, as for instance M. J. Wyngaarden does,[2] *“The Future of the Kingdom in Prophecy and Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1934). the reasons behind premillennial theology. It is still the fashion to resort to ridicule rather than to objective study of the conflicting viewpoints.

A proper study of the millennial issue demands, first, an analysis of the methods of interpretation which has produced amillennialism and premillennialism. This lays bare the problem and opens the way to see the issue in its true light.

## **Analysis of the Amillennial Method of Interpretation**

*Amillennial use of the literal method.* The amillennial method of interpreting Scripture is correctly defined as the spiritualizing method. It is clear, however, that conservative amillennialists limit the use of this method, and in fact adopt the literal method of interpreting most of the Scriptures. The methods followed by the allegorizing school of Alexandria which characterized the early amillennialists are now repudiated by all modern scholars. As Pieters states, “No one defends or employs the allegorizing method of exegesis. Calvin and the other great Bible students of the Reformation saw clearly that the method was wrong and taught the now generally accepted ‘grammatical-historical’ literal interpretation, so far as the Scriptures in general are concerned. That they retain the spiritualizing method in expounding many of the prophecies was because they found themselves forced to do so in order to be faithful to the New Testament.”[3] “Pieters, “Darbyism vs. The

Historic Christian Faith,” *Calvin Forum*, II, 225-28, May 1936, cited by Homer Payne, *Amillennialism as a System* (Unpublished Doctor’s Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1949), p. 75.

Not only Pieters but all conservative amillennialists recognize the need for literal interpretation. In addition to Pieters, Payne [4] Payne, *op. cit.*, pp. 82ff. It is regrettable that this work, including the long chapter on “The Spiritualizing Principle of Interpretation,” has not been published. cites Hamilton,[5] F. E. Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1942), pp. 38,40,58. Allis,[6] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 238. Calvin, [7] F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1886), pp. 193-94. Luther,[8] *Ibid.*, p. 327f. and others as following and supporting the principle of literal interpretation as the only proper grammatical-historical method. Amillennialists use two methods of interpretation, the spiritualizing method for prophecy and the literal method for other Scriptures. They differ from early amillennialists who regarded all Scripture as an allegory. The extent of application of one method or the other is determined by their rules for use of the spiritualizing method.

It is obvious at the beginning that, if the interpreter has a choice of method in interpreting Scripture, a large door for difference of opinion is opened. The general designation of prophecy as the field of spiritualization is by no means definite. In fact, amillennialists who are conservative interpret many prophecies literally and, on the other hand, use the spiritualizing method in some instances where prophecy as such is only remotely involved. The modern liberal scholar, who is also an amillennialist, feels free to use the spiritualizing method rather freely in areas other than prophecy whenever it suits his fancy, and being bound by no law of infallible inspiration need not be concerned if the result is not consistent. The spiritualizing method once admitted is not easy to regulate and tends to destroy the literal method. While the amillennial use of the literal method is general among the conservatives, among liberal groups it has less standing and use.

*The amillennial use of the spiritualizing method.* Conservative amillennialists, as we have seen, are somewhat embarrassed by the early allegorical school of amillennialists and with one voice deny the allegorical method as proper in interpreting Scripture. As Pieters stated above, “No one defends or employs the allegorizing method of exegesis.”[9] Pieters, *loc. cit.* In regard to the allegorical method, Farrar writes: “Allegory by no means sprang from spontaneous piety, but was the child of Rationalism which owed its birth to the heathen theories of Plato. It deserved its name, for it made Scripture say something else than it really meant.... Origen borrows from heathen Platonists and from Jewish philosophers a method which converts the whole Scripture, alike the New and Old Testament, into a series of clumsy, varying, and incredible enigmas. Allegory helped him to get rid of Chiliasm and superstitious literalism and the ‘antitheses’ of the Gnostics, but opened the door for deadlier evils.”[10] Farrar, *loc. cit.*, cited by Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

Now just what is the spiritualizing method and how does it differ from the allegorical? An allegory is commonly considered to be an extended metaphor. As Hospers puts it: “To exemplify: ‘Israel is like a vine,’—that is a simile. ‘Israel is a vine,’—that is a metaphor. And Psalm 80 gives an extended description of this idea, and that is an allegory.”[11] Hospers, *op. cit.*, p. 10. Spiritualization of the same word *Israel* would involve in Webster’s definition of spiritualization: “to take in a spiritual sense,—opposed to literalize.”[12] Webster’s New International Dictionary, Second Edition, *s.v. spiritualize*. In other words, if Israel should mean something else than Israel, e.g., the church in the New Testament composed largely of Gentiles, this would be spiritualization. Actually the church is not Israel at all, but has certain similarities to Israel (as well as many contrasts) just as the vine used in Psalm 80 is similar in its properties to Israel.

It can be seen that spiritualized and allegorized interpretations are not children of different races, but instead one family of thought separated only by degree of application. In both, the ordinary literal meaning is denied. Actually, Israel is no more a vine than Israel is the church. The difference in allegorizing and spiritualizing is for practical purposes nominal rather than essential. It is one of degree rather than one of principle.

It is clear, however, that the amillennial doctrine of spiritualization is far more restrained and less destructive to doctrine in general than the old allegorizing method which knew no rules and respected no boundaries. Conservative amillennialists have made a determined effort to formulate principles and rules governing the use of spiritualization in Scripture.

Hamilton summarizes these principles in his attack on interpreting Old Testament Scriptures literally: “But if we reject the

literal method of interpretation as the universal rule for the interpretation of all prophecies, how are we to interpret them? Well, of course, there are many passages in prophecy that were meant to be taken literally. In fact a good working rule to follow is that the literal interpretation of the prophecy is to be accepted unless (a) the passages contain obviously figurative language, or (b) unless the New Testament gives authority for interpreting them in other than a literal sense, or (c) unless a literal interpretation would produce a contradiction with truths, principles or factual statements contained in non-symbolic books of the New Testament. Another obvious rule to be followed is that the clearest New Testament passages in non-symbolic books are to be the norm for the interpretation of prophecy, rather than obscure or partial revelations contained in the Old Testament. In other words we should accept the clear and plain parts of Scripture as a basis for getting the true meaning of the more difficult parts of Scripture.”[13] Hamilton, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-54. problems of fulfillment of prophecy—it is born of a supposed necessity rather than a natural product of exegesis. (4) They do not hesitate to use spiritualization in areas other than prophecy if it is necessary to sustain their system of doctrine. (5) As illustrated in current modernism which is almost entirely amillennial, the principle of spiritualization has been proved by history to spread easily into all basic areas of theological truth. If the earthly reign of Christ can be spiritualized, so can His resurrection, His miracles, His second coming. Modern liberals can justify their denial of literal resurrection by use of the same hermeneutical rules that Hamilton uses for denial of an earthly millennial kingdom. (6) The amillennial method does not provide a solid basis for a consistent system of theology. The hermeneutical method of amillennialism has justified conservative Calvinism, liberal modernism, and Roman theology alike. Even conservative amillennialists are in almost total confusion, as will be shown later, in their spiritualized interpretation of passages taken literally by the premillenarians and in such basic and elementary problems as the fulfillment of the millennial kingdom idea. (7) Amillennialism has not arisen historically from a study of prophetic Scripture, but rather through its neglect. The inherent difficulties of the amillennial method of interpretation are discovered principally by study of their interpretation of Scripture. It becomes apparent early in such a study that amillennialists have no real guiding principle in spiritualization and that they come to widely different conclusions. In fact, as will be shown, the principal unifying factor which dominates amillennial interpretation is its negative note, its denial of an earthly reign of Christ. The expedients that are used and the interpretations of kingdom passages of Scripture that are reached to achieve this negative conclusion are often mutually destructive of each other. Having analyzed the method of amillennial interpretation, it now follows that an analysis of their interpretation of Scripture itself must be undertaken.

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# Millennial Series

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## Chapter 6

### Part 6: Amillennialism as a System of Theology

#### The Growing Importance of Millennialism

While the millennial controversy is nothing new, it has come to be recognized only recently that it plays such an important part in determining the form of theology as a whole. Instead of being simply a way of interpreting prophecy, millennialism now is seen to be a determining factor in any system of theology. Premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism each influence the system of theology of which each is a part. The controversy between amillennialism and premillennialism for this reason has taken on a new and sharper antagonism and its outcome is now seen to assume significant proportions.

It is the purpose of the present discussion to trace some of the influences of amillennialism upon theological systems. In the nature of the case, it will be necessary to survey a large field rather than analyze its parts, and to form general rather than particular conclusions. While it is not always easy to determine causal factors in doctrine, it can be shown at least that the amillennial approach is in harmony with certain theological ideas and is conducive to certain trends. The important fact which stands out in this field of investigation is that amillennialism is more than a denial of premillennial eschatology; it is an approach to theological interpretation which has its own characteristics and trends.

#### Amillennial Bibliology

While the influence of the amillennial theory upon bibliology has seldom been recognized by its own adherents, it is, in fact, one of the important results which accrue from its relation to Biblical interpretation. In the previous discussion of amillennialism as a method of interpretation,[1] “Amillennialism as a Method of Interpretation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, January-March 1950, pp. 42-50. the use of figurative interpretation of the Bible by the amillennarians was found to be the basic concept of their system and that which distinguished it from premillennialism. While amillennarians reject the figurative method of interpreting the Bible as a general method, it is used extensively not only in the interpretation of prophecy but in other areas of theology as well. It was shown that the only possible rule which could be followed by the amillennarian was hopelessly subjective—the figurative method was used whenever the amillennarian found it necessary to change the literal meaning of Scripture to conform to his ideas.

The dangers of this type of figurative interpretation should be apparent to anyone who respects the inspiration of Scripture. By it, any passage of the Bible can be construed to mean something other than its plain, literal meaning. The danger is well recognized by the amillennarians themselves as is witnessed by their strenuous rejection of the allegorical method and their earnest attempts to safeguard their method by various rules and guiding principles. It has already been shown how impossible it is to form any safe boundaries for the use of the spiritualizing method. The modernist who spiritualizes the resurrection of Christ does so by almost the same techniques as are used by the amillennarian B. B. Warfield[2] *Biblical Doctrines*, pp. 643-664. who finds heaven described in Revelation 20:1-10. Further, the history of modern liberalism has demonstrated that its adherents are drawn almost entirely from amillennial ranks.

What then is the amillennial influence on bibliology as a whole? The answer is already apparent when the diverse theological systems of Roman Catholic, modern liberal, and modern conservative writers are found to be all using essentially the same method. To be sure, the modern liberals who no longer hold to verbal inspiration do not need to

spiritualize the Scriptures to arrive at their interpretation. They can simply declare the Scriptures in error and go on. But the first inroad of liberalism in the church historically in Origen, and in modern times as well, has been by subverting the meaning by spiritualizing the words. While no doubt other errors are found in these three widely differing theological positions, their respective theologies could not have the variance that exists if each interpreted the Scriptures literally. The one factor which would correct everything would be a return to the literal meaning of the Bible. The introduction of the spiritualizing method in bibliology has opened the door for every variety of false doctrine according to the whims of the interpreter.

Amillennialism clearly, then, offers no defense against modern liberalism. While this conclusion may be disputed by amillenarians, the widespread defection of amillenarians to liberalism is an obvious fact in modern theology. It becomes all the more significant when it is realized that there has been practically no defection to modernism from those who were consistently premillennial. In fact, it is almost a byword in modern theology that a premillenarian is identified with Bible-believing conservatives who have resisted the modern trend of theology. Premillennialism has gone hand in hand with conservative belief in the inspired Word of God, while amillennialism has no consistent testimony in this regard.

One of the obvious problems of amillennialism in the field of bibliology is that their method of interpretation leaves large areas, particularly of the Old Testament, without any generally accepted meaning. As the spiritualizing method is by its nature almost entirely subjective, it is impossible to find any considerable measure of agreement on the spiritualized interpretation of great Old Testament prophecies which are taken literally by the premillenarian. When approaching the more difficult task of interpreting a New Testament book like Revelation, the utter bankruptcy of the common historical interpretation of this book becomes evident. There are literally scores of interpretations of the book of Revelation by the amillenarians who have attempted to interpret this book by the historical setting which was contemporary to them. The history of interpretation is strewn with the wreckage of multiplied schemes of interpretation which are every one contradictory of all the others. The writer has personally examined some fifty historical interpretations of Revelation all of which would be rejected by any intelligent person today. The literal method which regards the bulk of Revelation as future is the only consistent approach possible. The spiritualizing method of interpretation is a blight upon the understanding of the Scriptures and constitutes an important hindrance to Bible study.

Amillennial bibliology by its use of the spiritualizing method has departed from the proper objective interpretation of the Scriptures according to the ordinary grammatical sense of the terms, to a subjective method in which the meaning is to some extent at the mercy of the interpreter. Its subjective character has undermined amillennial theology as a whole. To the extent the spiritualizing method is used, to that very extent their theology loses all uniformity and self-consistency. In fact, as far as amillennialism itself is concerned, there is neither principle nor method to erect a self-consistent system of theology. The only consistent amillennial theologies which exist today are those which have most resisted the spiritualized method of interpretation and have to the greatest extent isolated its use. The ranks of modern amillenarians are almost completely dominated by the liberals in theology. While amillennialism can hardly be blamed for destructive higher criticism which has undermined faith in the Bible, it can also be said that it had no defense against it as far as its method and attitude are concerned. After all, if Scripture which teaches something contrary to a preconceived theory can be altered by spiritualizing it, of what importance is the concept of inerrancy? If amillennialism did not furnish the material of modern liberalism, it at least provided the atmosphere. While there have been a number of outstanding conservative theologians who were amillennial, the institutions in which they taught and the denominations of which they were a part have for the most part left the fold of conservatives. The spiritualizing method of interpretation has proved the Achilles' heel of amillennial conservatism. The amillenarian who wants to forsake conservatism for liberalism needs no change in method and the transition is not difficult. On the other hand, a premillenarian if enamored of modern liberalism would have to forego all he had formerly stood for in order to adopt liberalism.

## **Amillennial Theology Proper**

Amillennialism as such does not profoundly influence the area of theology proper except indirectly by giving comfort to modern liberalism. Conservative amillenarians have differed little from premillenarians on essential doctrines relating to God. The major differences in doctrine in regard to the Godhead continue to be controversies between Calvinists,

Arminians, and Socinians and their modern representatives.

A comparison between amillennial and premillennial theologies will reveal an important difference, however, in their respective views of the meaning of the incarnation. While the amillennial view confines itself to the limited perspective of fulfillment of the soteriological purposes of God, the premillennial notes the frequent reminders in the Gospels that Christ came also to fulfill the Davidic covenant, promising a king and a throne forever and the fulfillment of the strictly Jewish Messianic hope. Likewise the concepts of the second advent of Christ as well as the significance of the present advocacy of Christ are somewhat different. The amillennial tends to put less stress on the present ministry of Christ in heaven and to simplify the significance of prophecies regarding the second advent. Among some amillennarians the spiritualizing method of interpretation has robbed the second advent of its prophetic significance as a single future event. It has become only a process or symbol of divine providence in daily Christian experience. The historic creeds, while essentially amillennial, have resisted this tendency.

While agreeing on the person of the Holy Spirit, disagreement exists on the nature of the ministry of the Third Person in the various dispensations. The tendency of amillennial theology is to treat the work of the Holy Spirit as essentially the same in all ages. For this reason amillennarians usually reject the dispensational distinctions in the work of the Holy Spirit ordinarily held by premillennarians. Amillennarians usually hold that the Spirit indwelt saints in the Old Testament, regenerated them, and empowered them in much the same manner as in the New Testament. By contrast premillennarians normally view the present work of the Holy Spirit in the church as distinct from all other ages, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit as unique.

The influence of amillennialism on theology proper can be said, then, to be relatively unimportant as compared to other fields. The major difficulty here, as elsewhere, arises when the spiritualizing method of interpretation is applied, and to the extent this is resisted the difficulties subside.

## **Amillennial Angelology**

While conservative amillennarians and premillennarians agree in general on the doctrine of angels including the area of Satanology and demonology, only premillennarians present a united front in interpreting the Scriptures in this division of theology. The fact that amillennialism includes the diverse elements of conservative and liberal theology results in sharp differences in their teaching concerning angels. Liberal amillennarians tend to deny the existence of angels and relegate it all to pagan mythology, thereby denying also the Scriptural revelation.

An examination of conservative theologies dealing with angelology will, however, demonstrate that in general they minimize the importance and significance of angels in theology while premillennarians magnify the doctrine. The important point of departure is the disagreement regarding the binding of Satan during the millennium. On this point amillennarians are at variance with themselves. Augustine held that Satan was bound at the first coming of Christ. This, of course, is a flagrant spiritualization both of Revelation 20 and of all other passages dealing with the power of Satan in the world. It is characteristic of modern amillennarians to have a low view of the present power and activity of Satan. The obvious disagreement of Augustine's view with the facts of the history of the world and the church have in recent centuries helped to spark the new type of amillennialism, which finds the millennium in heaven and limits the binding of Satan to inactivity in heaven itself rather than on earth. Amillennarians to this day have no united testimony on the real meaning of the binding of Satan and usually ignore it, except when attacking premillennialism.

The attitude of amillennarians to the binding of Satan is another illustration of how the spiritualizing method in regard to prophecy affects other areas. The amillennial concept of the present binding of Satan, which is a future event to the premillennial, results in a definite underestimating of the present power of Satan. Modern amillennarians such as Allis and Berkhof still embrace fundamentally the view of Augustine that Satan was bound at the first advent. But how can the Scriptures be harmonized with such a view? The answer is that they can be harmonized only by spiritualizing plain and factual statements of the Bible which obviously were not intended to be spiritualized. A survey of important Scripture references makes this clear.

Acts 5:3 records the words of Peter to Ananias: “Ananias, why hath Satan filled thy heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back part of the price of the land?” Again in 1 Corinthians 7:5 Satan is spoken of as “tempting” Christians. In 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, Satan is revealed as one blinding the mind of all unbelievers. According to 2 Corinthians 11:14, Satan is often fashioned as an angel of light. Paul speaks of a messenger of Satan which buffeted him (2 Cor 12:7). Satan hindered Paul in coming to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:18). The future lawless one is said to come “according to the working of Satan with all power and lying wonders” (2 Thess 2:9). Hymenaeus and Alexander are delivered to Satan (1 Tim 1:20). 1 John 3:8 declares as a present truth, “He that doeth sin is of the devil.” Children of God are contrasted to children of the devil (1 John 3:10). In 1 Peter 5:8, the direct statement and exhortation is made: “Be sober, be watchful: your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.” How can anyone hold to the impossible theory that Satan is bound now when the Scriptures expressly state that Satan tempts, deceives, blinds, buffets, hinders, works lying wonders, and that he is walking about seeking whom he may devour? Such a theory is possible only when the spiritualizing method is used in interpreting the plain and literal statements of Scripture.

Amillenarians have escaped some of the force of the difficulty by minimizing and limiting the meaning of the binding of Satan itself. Calvin and Luther, for instance, while amillenarians, gave due recognition to the power of Satan in the world. They identified the binding of Satan with the idea that God is sovereign and that Satan has only a restricted area in which he is free to work. Berkhof, who carefully avoids the issue of the binding of Satan in his chapter on angelology, seizes upon the explanation of Calvin that fallen angels “drag their chains with them wherever they go.”[3] L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 149. By this means a middle position is taken which on the one hand recognizes the binding of Satan and on the other escapes the difficulty of contradicting the plain meaning of Scripture on the present power of Satan. In general, the fact remains that the amillennial view of angelology tends to have a doctrine of sin and Satan which is less realistic than that of the premillenarians.

## Amillennial Anthropology

Amillennial anthropology, including as it does conservative, liberal and Roman Catholic viewpoints, has more variance within itself than with premillennial anthropology. This area of theology is probably less affected by the millennial controversy than any other. The differences that do exist do not seem to connect directly with the millennial issue. Certain tendencies, however caused, can be noted.

Amillennial theology of the conservative Protestant kind has become identified in the last two centuries with the covenant theory of theology as contained in the covenant of works, covenant of redemption, and covenant of grace.[4] See L. Berkhof, *ibid.*, pp. 211ff. While some premillenarians attempt to combine the covenant theory with premillennialism, it has been more common for premillenarians to follow a dispensational emphasis founded upon recognition of the Biblical covenants. The covenant theory has affected anthropology to the extent that the covenant of works becomes related to the fall. As usually explained, the covenant of works postulates a covenant between God and Adam in which for being obedient in the test of the forbidden fruit Adam is promised eternal life. While recognizing the reality of the test involved for Adam and Eve, premillenarians have tended to confine their view to the more explicit statement of Scripture, questioning the promise of eternal life for obedience, which is nowhere mentioned in the Bible, and weakening the force of the covenant idea. In place of the covenant of works as such, premillenarians often offer the Edenic covenant in its place. This covenant includes all the aspects of man’s responsibility before the fall, including the prohibition of the forbidden fruit. As understood by the premillenarians, this covenant ceased to exist when the fall occurred and was succeeded by the Adamic covenant providing the basic conditions for man’s life on the earth after the fall, some of which conditions continue until the end of the present world order. While the issue is not to be minimized, it can be traced only indirectly to the millennial controversy. Many amillenarians also question the covenant of works. It introduces, however, the covenant theory as principally an amillennial influence and as opposed to the dispensational viewpoint of Scripture which is normal premillennialism.

In regard to the depravity of man, premillennialism normally embraces the concept of total depravity, taking a serious view of the sinful state of man and finding him totally unable to commend himself to God or effect his own salvation. In this regard amillennialism again has no certain voice, the conservatives generally accepting the doctrine of total depravity as expressed in Calvinism, but the Roman Catholic and modern liberal amillenarians having different views. While this can be

related to the method of spiritualizing the Scriptures, other factors seem to outweigh the millennial influences, and for all practical purposes this aspect of anthropology does not figure in the millennial controversy. Taken as a whole, anthropology is not directly related to the millennial issue.

## Amillennial Soteriology

The question of millennial influence on the doctrine of soteriology has been raised in recent years by the amillenarians themselves, and they have attempted to distinguish the soteriology of premillenarians from that held by amillenarians. In this area of theology, as in previous ones, amillenarians would do well to unify their own theology. The concepts of Roman theology and modern liberal theology, both amillennial, are in striking contrast to the views held by the Protestant Reformers. In both the Roman and modern liberal view human works play a large part in salvation. In both, the work of Christ on the cross is not considered a final dealing with sins or “finished” in the Reformed understanding of the term. In the conservative amillennial as well as the premillennial view, eternal security, assurance of salvation, complete justification, and regeneration issue from simple faith in Jesus Christ. It follows that there is more difference between various schools of amillennial thought than there is between conservative Reformed amillennialism and premillennialism.

The present controversy between amillenarians and premillenarians is not on the factors mentioned, however. Instead, the difference of opinion has arisen from the conflicting systems of theology resulting from covenant theology as opposed to dispensational theology. The respective merits of these opposing schools of interpretation will be given attention in a later discussion which will take up the controversy in detail.

For the purpose of the present survey the two approaches to theology may be distinguished in general terms. Covenant theology is the view that all the dispensations from Adam to the end of human history are aspects of God’s soteriological program. In other words, the dispensations are different presentations of the way of salvation in a gradually unfolding progression. The tendency of this viewpoint is to regard God’s general purpose as essentially that of saving the elect, to blend the various Biblical revelations regarding Israel, the Gentiles, and the church into one stream, and to minimize the differences between the various dispensations. In contrast, the dispensational theology while not disputing the view of the unity of God’s plan of salvation, finds in the various dispensations periods of stewardship which are not directly related to salvation. In a word, the dispensationalist does not consider the program of God for salvation as the sole purpose of God, and in fact denies that some of the dispensations are soteriological. The Mosaic law under the dispensational approach, while a way of life, is not considered a way of salvation. Heaven was not among its rewards nor was hell among its punishments.

The amillenarian who follows covenant theology will accordingly have a decidedly different viewpoint of the meaning of Scripture than the dispensationalist. There is difference of opinion on the essential meaning of some of the dispensations. While agreeing on the ground and in general on the terms of salvation, there is conflict on the relation of God’s plan of salvation to the revealed character of the Biblical dispensations. The importance of this issue is obvious, and deserves a more extended treatment which will follow later.

## Amillennial Ecclesiology

Next to the field of eschatology itself, ecclesiology offers the greatest contrast between the amillennial and premillennial views. Here exist some basic conflicts which arise in the nature of the case from the differing views of the nature of the present age. As this will be given attention later in a special treatment, it will be sufficient to outline the problem.

In ecclesiology, several aspects of amillennialism converge to produce a distinctive doctrine of the church. From the covenant theology usually embraced by amillenarians comes the concept of the essential unity of the elect of all dispensations. The fact that all the saints of all dispensations are saved on the basis of the death of Christ is interpreted as a just ground for concluding that the term *church* is properly used of saints in both the Old and New Testaments. Hence Jews and Gentiles who were saved in the Old Testament period are considered as included in the Old Testament church on much

the same basis as saints in the New Testament are included in the New Testament church. In fact, the usual tendency is to deny any essential difference in the nature of their salvation.

As amillennarians deny any future dispensation after the present age, they also deny any future to Israel as a nation. The many promises made to Israel are given one of two treatments. By the traditional Augustinian amillennialism, these promises are transferred by spiritualized interpretation to the church. The church today is the true Israel and inherits the promises which Israel lost in rejecting Christ. The other, more modern type of amillennialism holds that the promises of righteousness, peace, and security are poetic pictures of heaven and fulfilled in heaven, not on earth. This view does not necessarily identify Israel and the church. Some combine both viewpoints. It is obvious that the Augustinian view, in particular, has a tremendous influence upon ecclesiology. The Roman Church builds much of its claim for sovereignty on the inheritance from Israel of the combined political and religious authority revealed in the Old Testament. The concept of the church as an institution is enhanced, and ecclesiastical organization and authority given Scriptural sanction. By so much also, the New Testament revelation of the church as essentially a spiritual organism rather than an organization is often slighted and in effect denied. The great contrast between legalism as found in the Mosaic dispensation and grace as revealed in the present age is usually ignored. The effect is often a repetition of the Galatian error.

As contrasted to dispensational premillennialism, amillennialism tends to slight the doctrine of the body of Christ in ecclesiology as well as the distinctive basis of grace as the ground for the believer's walk before God in this age. Even a casual survey of amillennial theologies will reveal the tendency to limit discussion to the matters of church organization, church ordinances, and the means of grace. By contrast, premillennial treatments of ecclesiology tend to enlarge the concept of the church as the body of Christ—an organism rather than an organization—and give extended treatment to the spiritual life of the believer. Ecclesiology in the nature of the case offers one of the principal areas of disagreement in relation to the millennial issue. While somewhat slow to realize it, amillennarians are fully aware of this and like the recent work of Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, are relating the millennial issue to the doctrine of the church. For this reason it is considered important to analyze the amillennial doctrine of the church and attention will be given to this special aspect of the doctrine later.

## Amillennial Eschatology

In the field of eschatology, the principal differences occasioned by the millennial issue are found. Here again amillennialism does not present a united front and includes almost every variation not specifically classified as postmillennial or premillennial. The modern liberal rules out any specific scheme of eschatology according to his own ideas, denying usually the ordinary doctrines of the second advent, resurrection, and final judgment as held by the historic church. The Roman Church, of course, has its own complicated doctrine of future things which is quite foreign to that of Protestantism. The present analysis will need to be limited to the essential features of conservative Reformed amillennialism.

The doctrines of Reformed amillennialism in regard to eschatology are quite clear. They usually include as the essentials the doctrine of the second advent of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment of all, and the eternal state. A period of trouble corresponding to the predicted time of tribulation is usually assigned to the period just before the second advent, but in general terms. Under the amillennial viewpoint the portions of Scripture dealing with the rapture and judgment of the church, the resurrection of the righteous dead, the resurrection of the wicked dead, the judgment of the Gentiles, the judgment of Israel, and the judgment of Satan and angels are all combined in a closely knit sequence of events attending the second advent itself. The premillennial objection to this form of doctrine consists fundamentally in rejection of the spiritualizing of the many passages involved in order to make them conform to the pattern desired by the amillennarian. For instance, the amillennial view that the judgment of the Gentiles in Matthew 25:31-46 is the final general judgment is rejected by the premillennarian on the ground that the passage deals only with the living Gentiles, not any resurrected peoples, nor the church. Without doubt, the millennial controversy is largely settled by answering the question of the validity of the interpretation of these events in Scripture. The amillennial doctrine in this area demands a careful analysis and special attention will be given later to the major items of study.

## Conclusion

In this general survey of the influence of the amillennial view on theology as a whole, it was shown that the principal areas of influence in order of importance are eschatology, ecclesiology, and soteriology. In these three areas, particular attention must be paid to the nature of amillennial influence, and the discussion to follow will take up these areas in turn, beginning with soteriology.

Dallas, Texas

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 7

### Part 7: Amillennial Soteriology

Recent discussions of the millennial issue in theology have crystallized the problem of the relation of millennialism to the doctrine of salvation. The growing realization that premillennial doctrine affects theology as a whole has inspired an attempt to prove that premillennialism teaches or implies an heretical view of salvation. Allis writes, for instance, “The Dispensational interpretation of prophecy minimizes the Cross! The traditional interpretation magnifies it!”[1] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 121. Philip Mauro goes a step farther in his pamphlet, “Dispensationalism Justifies the Crucifixion.” Having made their accusation with one broad statement, they sometimes withdraw it with another, as in the case of Allis, “Dispensationalists do not reject the Cross or minimize its importance: they glory in it.”[2] *Ibid.*, p. 234. The impression is left, however, by the space that separates the accusation from the retraction that premillennarians are either inconsistent or heretical. The idea that the millennial controversy affects the doctrine of salvation is, however, not held by all. Rutgers finds the doctrine of salvation as held by conservative amillenarians and premillennarians a point of agreement rather than disagreement.[3] *Premillennialism in America*, p. 289. It is the purpose of this discussion to evaluate the influence of amillennialism on the soteriology of its adherents. Such an approach will serve as a background for consideration of the influence of premillennialism on its soteriology. While there is a large measure of agreement between them, certain important differences can be noted.

### Historical Development

Without attempting a detailed historical analysis, it is possible to trace the broad movement of amillennialism in relation to soteriology. Beginning with Augustine, amillennialism became identified with a theology which was continued in Protestantism. Augustine had a profound sense of the unity of the divine purpose and program. His form of amillennialism identified the millennium with the present age. He viewed Christianity as being engaged in a vital struggle, the City of God versus the City of Satan. The outcome will be victory at the second advent of Christ. As a part of this program, Augustine developed a doctrine of sin which involved man’s total depravity, and a doctrine of grace which provided for man’s inability through the sacraments as ministered by the church. Salvation was mediated through the church and its sacraments and while it was by faith, it was attainable only through unceasing effort. While the precise bearing of Augustine’s amillennialism to his soteriology is debatable, it is clear that his amillennial view of the present age and the role of the Roman Church in it was an essential part of his theology. The subsequent history of Roman doctrine evinces clearly the trend toward more emphasis on the place of the sacraments as the means of grace, less emphasis on man’s inability, and more delineation of works as the basic ground of salvation in the Roman system. The Augustinian denial of a future to Israel or of a future kingdom of righteousness and peace on earth in literal fulfillment of the Old Testament prophets tended to enhance legalism and human effort and to subtract from divine grace immediately bestowed apart from sacraments by a work of the Holy Spirit. Augustinian soteriology whether or not a fruit of amillennialism went hand in hand with a system of salvation by religious works which has continued in Roman theology to the present day. The spiritualizing method of interpretation of Scripture fostered by Augustine was helpless to counter this trend in the Roman Church.

Modern liberal Protestantism has continued the amillennial tradition of Augustine but has abandoned his soteriology. While it is difficult to generalize on the doctrine of salvation in modern liberal Christianity, it may be observed that it usually denies the efficacy of the death of Christ, indeed the necessity of it as the ground of salvation, and transfers the work of salvation from God to man. Again, salvation is largely a matter of human works, following ethical ideals, achieving a mystic union with God through religious experiences. While modern liberalism is amillennial in relation to the millennial issue, it is

really lacking in any vital soteriology. Man does not need to be saved because man is not lost. All he needs is education, experiences, and resolution. It is reformation rather than regeneration. The influence of amillennialism in modern liberal theology is more remote than in Roman theology. The main difficulty is not one of interpretation of the Scripture, but the denial of its authoritative revelation. In general, it may be concluded that the amillennial influence on soteriology in Roman theology and in modern liberalism is of only secondary importance.

The amillennial question comes more immediately to the fore when, comparing conservative amillennialism with premillennialism. Here the essential theological positions are similar. Both hold the Scriptures as inspired and authoritative. Both hold to essentially the same concept of the death of Christ as the work of God which is the ground of salvation. Because of this unity, it is possible to note significant variations in their soteriology in relation to the millennial issue.

## Relation of Amillennialism to Covenant Theology

The major source of difference lies in the so-called covenant theology of the amillennialists in contrast to the dispensational theology of the premillenarians. While all amillennialists are not covenant theologians, and all premillenarians do not observe the same dispensational distinctions, in general the distinction between them is covenant theology versus dispensationalism.

The idea of a covenant relation between God and man is, of course, as old as the Scriptures. God frequently dealt with man in the Old Testament on obvious covenant grounds. In the New Testament a gracious covenant is contained in the very Gospel message itself—the promise of grace and salvation to those who believe. While there is considerable difference in approach in the definition and use of covenants in the Bible, both premillennialists and amillennialists are in agreement on the existence of the covenant of grace which is proclaimed in the Scriptures.

Upon closer examination, however, a sharp cleavage is found in the concept of the covenant idea. Covenant theologians such as Charles Hodge conceive of the covenant of grace as originating in eternity past in a covenant agreement between the persons of the Trinity. This is sometimes called the covenant of redemption as a covenant within the Godhead, sometimes a covenant of grace as between God and man as represented in Christ, and by a number of other terms, such as covenant of mercy, evangelical covenant, national-ecclesiastical covenant, and covenant of life.[4] Cf. C. F. Lincoln, “The Covenants” (unpublished doctor’s dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary), pp. 79-80. As none of these terms is found as such in the Bible, their definition is largely what theologians have made them. The basic idea, however, is that the central purpose of God is salvation of the elect, and that this from eternity past has been the determining principle of divine providence.

Along with the idea of an eternal covenant of grace is the covenant of works which God is supposed to have made with Adam before the Fall. While including the Biblical material embracing the Edenic arrangement, it makes the important addition, without Scriptural warrant, of promising life to Adam and Eve if they proved obedient. Under this arrangement the harshness of predestination and the theology of the decree of God seemed to be softened by making it to some extent conditional upon man’s decision.

A number of features appear in covenant theology which can be mentioned only in abbreviated form in this discussion.[5] For a statement of covenant theology by one of its able adherents, cf. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 262-300. Covenant theology is of comparatively recent origin. There seems to be no reference to a covenant of works as defined by covenant theologians until after 1600.[6] C. F. Lincoln, *op. cit.*, p. 101. It was stated in extended form by Cocceius about 1645. While the covenant of grace as a general offer of grace in the Gospel was commonly held, the idea of an eternal covenant within the Godhead as the covenant of grace seems to have originated about the same time. In any case, covenant theology as such is not in the historic creeds of the church, was not taught explicitly by Calvin or the other Reformers, and even in the Westminster Confession was recognized only indirectly. In the Westminster Confession the covenant with Adam is regarded as the “first” and the covenant of grace as the “second,” thereby making it clear that the latter is not considered in its eternal character.

Covenant theology is definitely a product of theological theory rather than Biblical exposition. While covenant theologians

such as Berkhof labor over many Scriptural proofs, the specific formulas of the covenants are inductions from Calvinistic theology which go beyond the Scriptures. Charles Hodge, a covenant theologian, states plainly, “God entered into covenant with Adam. This statement does not rest upon any express declaration of the Scriptures.”[7] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II, 117.

The situation with the covenant of grace is somewhat different. The purpose of extending grace to man is obviously an eternal purpose of God. The aspect which is theoretical rather than Biblical is the creation of a covenant arrangement in regard to grace in the Godhead in which a “bargain” is struck in the eternal counsels of God, with the Father promising to extend grace, the Son to procure it by His death, and the Spirit to apply it. The original idea of the covenant of grace regarded it as an event subsequent to the fall of man, that is, an offer of grace with attendant promises to fallen man. This was the view of Cocceius, and the Consensus Helveticus and the Westminster Confession so regarded it. Witsius (1636-1708) in his *Economy of the Covenants* seems to be the first advocate of the idea of a covenant of grace from eternity past. Charles Hodge followed Witsius and other Calvinists found the covenant of grace in eternity past an important ingredient in the decree of God. The point of distinction in covenant theology, then, is not simply an assertion of a covenant of grace in the broad sense of the offer of grace to man, but the doctrine that the covenant of grace is an important and determinative aspect of the eternal decree and is in fact the central purpose of God.

Covenant theology as held today is confined largely to amillennial Reformed theologians who are essentially conservative and following closely in the theology derived from the Reformation. Modern Arminians and Unitarians while usually amillennial do not accept covenant theology. Modern Baptists while often essentially Calvinistic are not followers of the covenant idea. Covenant theology is therefore confined to a minority of contemporary amillennialists. On the other hand, it is not uncommon to find some premillenarians who embrace in part the covenant idea. It is therefore not only difficult to generalize, but the very relation of amillennialism to covenant soteriology might be questioned. In spite of these facts, a definite relation exists between amillennial covenant theology in the field of soteriology and the concept of the same field by the premillenarian. This is not only supported by obvious facts, but explains some of the antagonism between the soteriology of amillenarians and premillenarians.

## **Covenant Theology in Conflict with Dispensationalism**

The major conflict of covenant theology is with dispensationalism. Covenant theology regards all dispensations as phases of the one purpose of God expressed in the covenant of grace. Dispensations are different and progressive applications of the same essential principles of grace. Berkhof’s summary of the covenant view may be taken as representative: “On the basis of all that has been said it is preferable to follow the traditional lines by distinguishing just two dispensations or administrations, namely, that of the Old, and that of the New Testament; and to subdivide the former into several periods or stages in the revelation of the covenant of grace.”[8] Berkhof, *op. cit.*, p. 293. The entire Old Testament constitutes under covenant theology a progressive revelation of one covenant, the covenant of grace, and all the Biblical covenants are phases or developments of it. The final revelation is given in the New Testament. This in effect declares that God has one central purpose, the salvation of the elect, and that all the dispensations are essentially the fulfillment of this purpose. By contrast, the premillennial and dispensational interpretation of Scripture builds upon the successive Biblical covenants which are expressly revealed in the Bible, interprets them literally, and conditions the form and responsibility of life in successive dispensations according to the covenants which apply.

It is not possible in limited space to undertake the refutation of covenant theology and the defense of a dispensational view. The major objections to the covenant view can only be stated. Covenant theology is built upon a spiritualizing method of interpreting the Scriptures. In order to make the various covenants of the Old Testament conform to the pattern of the covenant of grace it is necessary to interpret them in other than their literal sense. This is illustrated in the promises given to Abraham and to Israel which are interpreted as promises to the New Testament church. Berkhof states, in regard to the covenant of grace, “The main promise of God, which includes all other promises, is contained in the oft-repeated words, ‘I will be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.’ Gen 17:7.”[9] *Ibid.*, p. 277. The promise was intended to be applied to Abraham’s physical seed and to Abraham himself. It is characteristic of covenant theology to appropriate these promises as belonging to all who receive grace under the covenant of grace. The covenant theory allows no place for literal fulfillment of

Israel's national and racial promises and either cancels them on the ground that Israel failed to meet the necessary conditions, or transfers them to the saints in general. From the dispensational and literal standpoint, this is misappropriation of Scriptural promises.

As previously stated, a serious objection to the covenant of grace is that it is nowhere directly stated in Scripture in the form claimed by the amillenarian covenant theologians. The concept of an eternal covenant of grace was never seriously advanced until the post-Reformation period when it was proposed by Witsius. It is not contained in the historic creeds of the church as an eternal covenant.

One of the serious errors of the covenant theologians is their disregard of the essentially legal and non-gracious rule provided by the Mosaic Covenant. The New Testament in no uncertain terms describes it as a ministry of death and condemnation, and it is never described as a way of salvation. Allis, however, plainly states, "The law is a declaration of the will of God for man's *salvation*." [10] Oswald T. Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 39. He further states, "The reward of obedience is life; the penalty for disobedience is death." [11] *Loc. cit.* Again, "The priest and the altar make it possible for sinful man to obtain mercy from a righteous God. In this respect the law is an impressive declaration of the covenant of grace." [12] *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40. It is hard to reconcile such a theory to the direct statement of Scripture that "the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). According to Galatians 2:16, justification is impossible by the law. Paul denounced this concept as a perversion of the gospel (Gal 1:7-9) which deserved the severest condemnation. If the Mosaic law could provide salvation, then it was a salvation by religious works and not of faith. Such a viewpoint does violence to the pure grace of God provided in Christ.

## The Reductive Error of Covenant Theology

Covenant theology is another illustration of overstatement of that which is true in its right perspective. All Reformed theologians would agree that God has a complete and comprehensive purpose as stated in the theological doctrine of the decree of God. Under this concept, all events of every classification have been determined by God from eternity past, but with full respect to the manner of their execution. Thus the necessary element of freedom is preserved and man acts according to his will while at the same time fulfilling the decree of God. Under a proper concept of this decree of God, it must be held that the decree of God is holy, wise, and good, in keeping with the attributes of God. All the events of the created world are designed to manifest the glory of God. The error of covenant theologians is that they combine all the many facets of divine purpose in the one objective of fulfillment of the covenant of grace. From a logical standpoint, this is the reductive error—the use of one aspect of the whole as the determining element.

The dispensational view of Scripture taken as a whole is far more satisfactory as it allows for the literal and natural interpretation of the great covenants of Scripture, in particular those with Abraham, Moses, David, and with Israel as a whole, and explains them in the light of their own historical and prophetic context without attempting to conform them to a theological concept to which they are mostly unsuited. This explanation fully sustains the fundamental thesis of Calvinism, that God is sovereign and all will in the end manifest His glory. The various purposes of God for Israel, for the church which is His body, for the Gentile nations, for the unsaved, for Satan and the wicked angels, for the earth and for the heavens have each their contribution. How impossible it is to compress all of these factors into the mold of the covenant of grace!

The amillennial viewpoint in soteriology as contained in the covenant theory limits the saving purpose of God to the salvation of the individual soul. The dispensational interpretation of Scripture, on the other hand, magnifies the death of Christ as providing not only the ground of salvation of all saints in all ages—essentially one way of salvation for all—but also the ground for the peculiar and unique features of grace revealed to the church, the body of Christ, the saints of this present dispensation. It secures for them not only the riches of grace in Christ, but the ground for victory over present sin. The death of Christ under the dispensational viewpoint also constitutes the basis for the fulfillment of the new covenant to Israel, the promises of grace to the nation Israel in the prophesied kingdom on earth when the Son of David will reign. Properly understood, the dispensational viewpoint magnifies and enriches the meaning of the death of Christ and frees it from the limiting restrictions of covenant theology.

# Conclusion

By way of general conclusion, amillennial soteriology has its own peculiar characteristics. Amillennialism provides the spiritualizing method of interpretation of the Old Testament necessary to covenant theology. It permits the Roman Catholic as well as the modern liberal soteriology. While amillennialism cannot be charged with being the causal factor of all the variations of soteriology held by amillenarians, its material and method permit them. On the other hand a genuine premillennial and dispensational interpretation rule out at once the Roman Catholic, the modern liberal, and if applied consistently the covenant theology view as well. The millennial issue does provide, then, an influence in the field of soteriology which demands more recognition than has been given to it in the history of doctrine.

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# Millennial Series

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## Chapter 8

### Part 8: Amillennial Ecclesiology

Few doctrines are more central in the Christian faith than the doctrine of the church. The teachings concerning its nature, form of government, its sacraments, the priesthood of the church, its essential duties, its rights, and its relation to the world and to the state combine to form an important segment of Christian truth. Given the doctrine of the church, the rest of a theological system can almost be deduced.

It is the purpose of this aspect of the study to trace the influence of amillennialism in the field of ecclesiology and to form some estimate of its importance and results. There has been growing realization that some relation exists and that those who differ on the millennial issue usually hold differing concepts of the church itself.

#### The Influence of Amillennialism on Roman Ecclesiology

As amillennialism had its rise historically in the Roman church and developed as an integral part of the Roman system, significant facts appear in the history of the period from Augustine in the fourth century to the Reformation. The Roman Church, first of all, regarded itself as the continuation of Israel as a spiritual entity. The political or theocratic character of Israel as well as its religious life was considered as continuing in new form in the Roman Church. Like Israel the Roman Church was a combined political and spiritual society. Just as Israel had power under God to legislate, to govern itself politically and religiously, so the Roman Church claimed for itself similar power. As the spiritual is higher and more important than the political, so the church claimed authority over the secular state.

The amillennial interpretation of Scripture was, of course, essential to this Roman viewpoint. Only by denying fulfillment of the promises of God to Israel and by spiritualized interpretation transferring them to the Roman Church could any vital connection between Judaism and Christianity be established. The church had to be the successors and inheritors of Israel's promises. This is essentially the amillennial system of interpretation. The premillennial interpretation, for instance, would never have issued into the Roman system if consistently applied. The amillennial approach was essential to the Roman system of doctrine. Apart from it, the Roman system would have been without authorization in its use of truth committed to Israel only.

In the period before the Reformation, the Roman Church tended to emphasize the external nature of the church. Its organization, authority, sacraments, and religious rites were for the most part external, and adherence and submission to the external Roman Church were the indispensable prerequisites for salvation and fellowship in Roman Christianity. The Roman Church did not deny that there existed the so-called invisible church, but they defined this as a fellowship of believers derived from being a part of the visible, that is, the Roman, Church. They held that there is no church invisible which is not a part of the visible Roman Church, and the important question was whether one was a part of this visible church. As Berkhof summarizes the Roman position, "From the days of Cyprian down to the Reformation the essence of the Church was sought ever increasingly in its external visible organization. The Church Fathers conceived of the catholic Church as comprehending all true branches of the Church of Christ, and as bound together in an external and visible unity, which had its unifying bond in the college of bishops. The conception of the Church as an external organization became more prominent as time went on." [1] L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 562. The modern Roman Church also identifies the mystical with the visible church. Pope Pius XII in an encyclical letter issued in August, 1950 denounced those in the Roman Church who hold "they are not bound by the doctrine...which teaches that the mystical body of Christ and the

Roman Catholic Church are one and the same things...and reduce to a meaningless formula the necessity of belonging to the true church in order to gain salvation.” Cf. *Time*, Sept 4, 1950, pp. 68, 71.

The tendency of ecclesiology in the Roman Church before the Reformation and to a large extent ever since has been an emphasis on the external character of the church. This had its rise in the idea that the church is essentially theocratic, a continuation of God’s purpose toward Israel. This in turn was built on the spiritualizing system of interpretation fostered by Augustinian amillennialism. While amillennialism does not lead necessarily to the conclusions drawn by the Roman Church, the conclusions that were reached would have been impossible without the amillennial viewpoint.

Some of the more particular conclusions of the Roman Church are traced to appropriation of Jewish promises in the Old Testament. The sacramental idea received much of its impetus from the Levitical rites and the Aaronic priesthood. From the Protestant point of view, of course, much of Romanism is derived unabashed from paganism, and for this, amillennialism is not responsible. On the other hand, a literal interpretation of the prophetic Word would have ruled out paganism as well as the ritualism. The complicated religious rites and ceremonies for the most part did not come into the church until amillennialism had become the dominant viewpoint.

## The Ecclesiology of the Reformation

The Protestant movement begun in the Reformation was in large measure corrective of the abuses which had become prevalent in the Roman system. The sacraments were overhauled and reduced to New Testament Biblical formulas. The priesthood was restored to all believers. The hierarchical system was changed in most of Protestantism to Biblical patterns. Justification became a work of God in true believers instead of a work mediated through the church. The Protestant movement, however, was not able to extricate itself completely from Roman influence. This is evidenced in eschatology, in the long disputes over transubstantiation, and more particularly in continuing to a large extent the emphasis on the external church. While most of the Reformers did not limit the church to its external form and recognized the true body of believers as such, the tendency to organization and attempts to enter the political arena early were in evidence.

The Reformation did not change essentially the concept of the church. For most Reformers it was still largely a visible entity with its roots in Judaism and its boundaries including all the saints. The church was thought of as the logical successor of Israel, the inheritor of its spiritual promises. Indeed, the church was considered to have begun in the Old Testament, sometimes with Adam, and by others with Abraham. Calvin refers to the saints of the Old and New Testament under the one title of the “Church.”[2] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), I, 503. Calvin further states explicitly: “The covenant of all the fathers is so far from differing substantially from ours, that it is the very same; it only varies in the administration.... Moreover, the apostle makes the Israelites equal to us, not only in the grace of the covenant, but also in the signification of the sacraments.... Wherefore it is certainly and clearly proved, that the same promises of an eternal and heavenly life, with which the Lord now favours us, were not only communicated to the Jews, but even sealed and confirmed by sacraments truly spiritual.”[3] *Ibid.*, I, 466, 468, 470. Calvin held that the New Testament church differed from saints in the Old Testament principally in degree of revelation. In the Old Testament they had the shadows, but the realities were revealed in the New Testament. Essentially Calvin along with many of the Reformers continued the basic Roman conception that the saints of the Old and New Testament belong to the same entity, the church. In order to achieve this end, however, the Reformers had to deny to the Jews all their distinctive promises and had to nullify the hope of Israel for an earthly kingdom of righteousness. Calvin, for instance, refers to “the folly of the whole nation of the Jews in the present age, in expecting any earthly kingdom of the Messiah....”[4] *Ibid.*, I, 488. His conclusions were an outgrowth of amillennial theology and its method of interpretation. It is quite clear that the leaders of the Reformation continued in the main the basic Roman idea of the church as the successor of Israel as well as being one with Israel. The church, in their viewpoint, varies in details and in administration, but is essentially the same in both Testaments. somewhat to the position of Augustine. This is defined by Berkhof as a denial of the Roman position that the kingdom of God is identical to the *visible* church, and a return to the concept that it is identical to the *invisible* church, i.e., the whole company of believers.[6] *Loc. cit.* This is essentially the position of amillennial conservatives today. Liberal theologians following the lead of Ritschl have regarded the kingdom of God not as a congregation of believers but a system of ethical ideals. The advance of the kingdom for them is the advance of ethical

principles. Augustine, Rome, the Reformers, and the modern liberal agree, however, in denouncing that the kingdom of God is essentially Messianic, the rule of Jesus Christ as the Son of David following the second advent. They emphasize that the kingdom of God is on earth now, and its advance and ultimate triumph is the advance and triumph of the church.

## Amillennial Ecclesiology in Relation to Israel

The most obvious fact of amillennial ecclesiology is that it denies any millennial period following the church age in which righteousness and peace will flourish on earth. All the prophetic anticipations of such a period are either considered conditional and therefore uncertain, or are to be fulfilled in the church in the present age. The denial of a future millennium is based on the method of giving a spiritualized interpretation to Old Testament kingdom prophecies. While all amillenarians are not agreed on the details of the interpretation of the Old Testament kingdom promises, the same general principles are usually recognized by all of them.

The amillennial ecclesiology denies to Israel any future as a nation. Israel is never to be a political entity in the world in fulfillment of the promises of a glorious kingdom-period. Promises in the Old Testament such as Jeremiah 31:35-37 which assure Israel's continuance as "a nation before me forever," are interpreted merely in the racial concept or as fulfilled spiritually in the sense that the *church* shall continue forever. Allis, while he does not seem to expound the passage directly, links it with the new covenant with the teaching simply that "the prophet is picturing the ultimate and final state of God's people." [7] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 238. The interpretation stultifies any hope of Israel for a national future. Their only hope is spiritual, by entering into faith in Christ in the present inter-advent age.

Two forms of interpretation seem to prevail among the amillenarians in regard to the form in which Israel's promises shall be fulfilled. The traditional Reformed position as illustrated in Calvin is that the church takes Israel's place as its spiritual successor. Calvin regarded Israel's hopes of a future kingdom as without warrant—in fact, he held that this hope was a result of their spiritual blindness imposed as a judgment because of their rejection of Christ. Calvin stated, "And the folly of the whole nation of the Jews in the present age, in expecting an earthly kingdom of the Messiah, would be equally extraordinary, had not the Scriptures long before predicted that they would thus be punished for their rejection of the gospel." [8] Calvin, *op. cit.*, I, 488. Calvin's interpretation is based partially on the idea that Israel had erroneously interpreted the promises of a future kingdom on earth literally, and partially on the thought that Israel had forfeited these promises by disobedience. He seems to put most of his argument on the former point, however. Calvin wrote, "The point of controversy between us and these persons, is this: they maintain that the possession of the land of Canaan was accounted by the Israelites their supreme and ultimate blessedness, but that to us, since the revelation of Christ, it is a figure of the heavenly inheritance. We, on the contrary, contend, that in the earthly possession which they enjoyed, they contemplated, as in a mirror, the future inheritance which they believed to be prepared for them in heaven." [9] *Ibid.*, I, 490. Calvin held, then, in the main, that the literal interpretation of Israel's promises was wrong in the first place. They were intended to teach Israelites their prospect in heaven rather than in earth.

Allis, while an ardent Calvinist, places most of his argument on the point that the promises were conditional, and not fulfilled because of Israel's disobedience and rejection of Christ. The fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant according to Allis is conditioned upon obedience. Allis states, "It is true that, in the express terms of the covenant with Abraham, obedience is not stated as a condition. But that obedience was presupposed is clearly indicated by two facts. The one is that obedience is the precondition of blessing under all circumstances.... The second fact is that in the case of Abraham the duty of obedience is particularly stressed." [10] Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

Allis agrees with Calvin, however, in regarding the New Testament church as the true Israel, the organic continuance of the church of the Old Testament. He denounces in unsparing terms those who hold that Israel must mean Israel: "Carrying to an almost unprecedented extreme that literalism which is characteristic of Millenarianism, they [the Brethren Movement] insisted that Israel must mean Israel, and that the kingdom promises in the Old Testament concern Israel and are to be fulfilled to Israel." [11] *Ibid.*, p. 218.

Allis is guilty, in this instance, of a serious misrepresentation. It so happens that there is considerable opposition to Calvin's

view not only among premillenarians but among postmillenarians and even amillenarians. Charles Hodge, for instance, a representative postmillenarian, regards practically all the New Testament references to Israel as referring to those of that race, i.e., not the church as such. Hodge states in regard to Romans 11:26, which Allis takes for granted is allusion to the church: “Israel, here, from the context, must mean the Jewish people, and *all Israel*, the whole nation.”[12] Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 589.

William Hendriksen, Professor of New Testament Literature at Calvin Seminary, a well-known amillenarian, in expounding Romans 11:25-26 also holds that Israel means Israel—the elect of Israel as he puts it.[13] William Hendriksen, *And So All Israel Shall Be Saved*, p. 33. Allis’ “unprecedented extreme” turns out to be somewhat normal even among fellow amillenarians. The Roman Catholic idea that the church is the true Israel in fact is fading from contemporary amillenarians. The essentially postmillennial idea that Israel will be incorporated in the church and her promises fulfilled to her in a spiritualized sense seems to be gaining popularity.

While considerable difference of opinion exists among amillenarians regarding the best method of disposing of the mass of Old Testament prophecies which seem to indicate a future earthly kingdom for Israel, they agree in the main principle, that is, that these promises will not be fulfilled to Israel in a kingdom age to follow the present dispensation. Whether cancelled because of rejection of Christ as Messiah or spiritualized according to Calvin’s formula, amillennialism with one voice condemns any literal fulfillment of these promises.

## **Amillennial Ecclesiology in Relation to Dispensational Distinctions**

In addition to nullifying most of the meaning of Israel’s promises, amillennialism does not seem to grasp many of the distinctive New Testament revelations concerning the church. While amillenarians do not deny the concept of the church as an organism in contrast to the church as an institution, they do not find much distinctive in this form of revelation. It is simply the contrast between reality and profession, or between the church visible and invisible. It is not something new, distinct, and unique.

Dispensational distinctions such as the mystery character of the entire present age are definitely denied by amillenarians. For them the present age is clearly anticipated in the kingdom prophecies of the Old Testament. Premillenarians, on the other hand, usually regard the present age as hid from Old Testament prophets, and constituting a new and unrevealed development in the plan of God. All along the line of important doctrines relating to the church, the amillenarians ignore or minimize the distinctive truth relating to the church. The fact of the new creation in which the church is related to the resurrection of Christ, the doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit as forming the church into the body of Christ, the unique ground of justification based on being “in Christ,” the universal indwelling of the Holy Spirit in every believer in this age, and the distinctive prophetic hope of the church are qualified or denied by amillennial ecclesiology. Many precious truths are lost in the broad generalizations which characterize the amillennial treatment of ecclesiology.

## **Conclusion**

Taken as a whole, it is clear that amillennialism does not yield the same type of ecclesiology as either premillennialism or postmillennialism. The millennial issue is far more pointed in ecclesiology than is generally recognized. In fact, it is not too much to state that many of the millennial issues such as the question of fulfillment of promises to Israel are the touchstones of theology as a whole as well as of ecclesiology. Outside of eschatology itself, no area is more vitally related to millennialism than ecclesiology.

Dallas, Texas

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 9

### Part 9: Amillennial Eschatology

(Continued from the October-December Number, 1950)

While amillennialism has its influence in all areas of theology, it is natural that it should affect eschatology more than any other. As a form of denial of a future millennial kingdom on earth, it stands in sharp contrast to premillennial eschatology.

In previous discussion of amillennialism, it has been brought out that amillennialism is by no means a unified theology, including within its bounds such diverse systems as modern liberal theology, Roman Catholic theology, and conservative Reformed theology. It is therefore impossible to generalize on amillennial eschatology without dividing it into these major divisions. Aside from various small sects who include within their tenets the premillennial concept, premillennialism for the most part presents a united front on eschatology in all major areas. Amillennialism, however, disagrees within itself on major issues.

#### Modern Liberal Eschatology

Modern liberal eschatology almost without exception follows the amillennial idea. Modern liberalism usually disregards postmillennialism, or the idea of a golden age of righteousness on earth, as well as premillennialism which advances such an age after the second advent. For them, all promises of ultimate righteousness are relegated to the life after death.

Homrighausen has called the idea of a millennium on earth “a lot of sentimental heavenism.”[1] Elmer G. Homrighausen, “One World at a Time,” *Contemporary Religious Thought*, Thomas S. Kepler, editor, p. 372. He goes on to denounce both millennial otherworldliness and the idea that this world is heaven as well: “Millennialists are right in their basic discoveries that this world is fragmentary and needs re-creation. They are right in their insistence that this is an ‘end’ world; things here come to an end and have a limit. They are right in their insistence upon the other world, and in their emphasis upon the pull of God’s power of resurrection. But their abnormal interest in the other world, their reading of eschatology in mathematical terms of time, their otherworldliness and consequent passivity as regards this world, is wrong. But Christians need to be saved, too, from that modern dynamic materialism which romantically sentimentalizes this world into the ultimate. This identifies the time world with the eternal world. This paganism is a hybrid attempt on the part of man to make the creature into the creator. In Christian circles it makes the Kingdom of God a blueprint for a world order. We admire this vehement realism, but we absolutely reject its presumptions that this world is a self-contained and a divine heaven. We live on earth! One world at a time.”[2] *Loc. cit.* In other words, there will be no millennium of righteousness on earth either before or after the second advent.

In modern liberalism, there remains a form of postmillennialism which believes that the kingdom of God in the world is advancing and will be ultimately triumphant. In one sense this can be regarded as amillennial in that it denies any real fulfillment to millennial promises. It is dyed in bright hues of optimism and visionary idealism. Its doctrinal background is postmillennialism rather than amillennialism even though amillennialism often has an optimistic note as well. In modern liberal eschatology, the idea of progress and improvement is treated with some skepticism even as it is in modern philosophy. The trend is that indicated by Homrighausen—“one world at a time.” spiritual terms, rather than in bodily terms. This is not to say that there will be no judgment, and no rewards or punishments awaiting us. Indeed, we are being judged all the while, and the rewards and punishments can be seen even now. Every day is Judgment Day.”[6] Nevin C. Harner, *I*

*Believe*, p. 83. In other words, Harner believes there will be no future judgment and no future resurrection of the body. The principle of spiritualizing Scripture is carried by the modern liberal to its ultimate extreme unencumbered with any idea of inspiration of Scripture and need for literal interpretation. Such is the legacy of spiritualization and unbelief as they combine in modern liberal amillennialism.

## Roman Catholic Eschatology

It is not within the scope of this discussion to treat the large area involved in Roman Catholic eschatology. The objections of Protestant theology to Roman eschatology have been the subject of voluminous writings ever since the Reformation. In general, however, it may be said that Roman eschatology tends to take Scripture more literally than modern liberal amillennialism. A vivid doctrine of judgment for sin after death, of resurrection of the body, and ultimate bliss for the saints are central aspects. Protestant objection has been principally to the doctrine of purgatory with all its kindred teachings and to the denial of the efficacy of the work of Christ on the cross, making unnecessary any purgatory or any human works whatever to qualify the believer in Christ for immediate possession of salvation, and security, and immediate entrance into heaven upon death. As in modern liberal amillennialism, however, Roman theology would be impossible if a literal method of interpretation of Scripture was followed. Roman theology concurs with amillennialism in denying any future kingdom of righteousness on earth after the second advent, and in its essential method follows the same type of spiritualization as modern liberalism. Amillennarians group together the judgment of the nations (Matt 25:31-46), the judgment of the church (2 Cor 5:9-11), the judgment of Israel (Ezek 20:33-38), the judgment of the martyrs (Rev 20:4-6), the judgment of the wicked dead (Rev 20:11-15), and the judgment of the angels (2 Pet 2:4; Rev 20:10). It is not the purpose of the present discussion to refute the amillennial position on the judgments nor to sustain the premillennial, but the wide divergence of the two viewpoints is evident.

Of major importance in arriving at the respective doctrines characterizing the amillennial and premillennial concept of the judgments is the determining factor of spiritualizing versus literal interpretation. The amillennarian can deal lightly with the various Scripture passages involved, and with no attempt to explain them literally. The difference in character between the church being judged in heaven and the living nations being judged on earth as in Matthew 25 is glossed over and made the same event, even though there is no mention whatever of either the church or of resurrection in Matthew 25. The judgment of martyrs before the millennium and the judgment of the wicked dead after the millennium as outlined in Revelation 20 is brought together by the expedient of denying the existence of the millennium after the second advent.

It is obvious that the amillennial viewpoint is a combination of spiritualizing and literal interpretation. While they believe in a literal second advent and a literal judgment of all men, they do not apply the form of literal interpretation to the details of the many passages involved. It is because the premillennarians insist on literal interpretation of the details as well as the event that they find the various judgments differing as to time, place, and subjects.

The extent of spiritualization being used by amillennarians in eschatology is highly significant, as has been noted in previous discussions. The spiritualizing principle has been excluded so far as robbing eschatology of any specific events such as the second advent or a literal resurrection of the dead. On the other hand the spiritualizing method has been used whenever the literal method would lead to the premillennial viewpoint. It is precisely on the points at issue between them that the spiritualizing method is used by the amillennarians. The premillennial interpretation is thus waved aside as inadequate, confused, or contradictory not by sound exegetical methods but by denial that the passages in question mean what they seem to mean if taken literally. It is for this reason that the controversy between the millennial views often has more sound and fury than facts, and in the minds of many scholars the matter is settled before it is fairly examined.

Even Louis Berkhof who is notably lucid and factual in his treatment of theological disputes writes concerning premillennialism: "In reading their description of God's dealings with men one is lost in a bewildering maze of covenants and dispensations, without an Ariadne thread to give safe guidance. Their divisive tendency also reveals itself in their eschatological program. There will be two second comings, two or three (if not four) resurrections, and also three judgments. Moreover, there will also be two peoples of God, which according to some will be eternally separate, Israel dwelling on earth, and the Church in heaven." [7] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 710.

We can hardly expect those who admittedly are bewildered and confused to be able to debate the issues, though Berkhof does much better than most amillenarians. The attitude of Berkhof, however, is significant. To him it is transparent that any doctrine other than the amillennial interpretation is simply impossible. But should amillennialism be taken for granted? Why should there not be three or four resurrections instead of one? What is wrong with there being two peoples on earth? Why on the face of it should we dispute the distinction between the rapture and the second coming? The answer is simply that it contradicts amillennialism, but it does not contradict the Bible literally interpreted. Certainly if one is to reject a doctrine because it is complicated, no theologian could for a moment accept the doctrine of the Trinity or debate the fine points of the relation of the two natures in Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of the eternal state, however, is for the most part one of agreement rather than disagreement. Those who distinguish the program of God for Israel and the church find them fulfilled in the eternal state in the respective spheres of the new earth and the new heavens. While this is rejected by the amillenarians who merge all the saints of all ages into one mass of redeemed humanity, it is not of the same importance theologically as other points of divergence. Reformed amillenarians and premillenarians unite on the important point of a literal eternity, in which both heaven and hell will be peopled.

The millennial controversy can only be dissolved by a careful analysis of the details of premillennialism. The amillennial contention is, in brief, that premillenarians do not have a case, that their interpretations are confused, contradictory, and impossible. The answer to these charges has, of course, already been made in the abundant premillennial literature available today. It is the purpose of the discussion which will follow, however, to take up the mainsprings of the premillennial interpretation of Scripture and to establish the important and determining interpretations of Scripture which underlie premillennialism as a system of theology. Amillennialism has failed to present any unified system of theology or eschatology. Within its ranks, consistent with its main principles, are the widest divergences on every important doctrine. The purpose of the further discussion of premillennialism is to show that a consistent premillennialism can be erected with principles embedded in its system of interpretation. These at once are determining and corrective so that a premillenarian is always properly a conservative and Protestant theologian. The issues raised briefly in the survey of amillennial theology which is here concluded will be considered again seriatim as they come in conflict with tenets of premillennialism.

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 10

### Part 10: The Historical Context of Premillennialism

While modern premillennialism depends upon Scriptural foundations for its apologetic and theological statement, it has nevertheless a significant historical context. It is regrettable that some historians have held low views of premillennialism, with the result that premillennialism has seldom had fair consideration in historical treatments of Christian doctrine. Liberals and skeptics surveying the evidence with theological indifference have often arrived at a fairer view of the evidence for premillennialism in history than those endeavoring to defend another millennial position.

It is hardly within the province of a theological study of premillennialism to include an adequate history of the doctrine. An exhaustive modern study of the subject remains for someone to undertake. Fortunately, the main issues are clear in even a casual study, and the significant evidence in relation to premillennialism can hardly be disputed by any scholarly sources produced to date. The evidence for premillennialism in the Old and New Testaments and in the literature and theology of the early church at least in its main elements is commonly recognized. It needs here only to be restated as forming the historical context of modern premillennialism. This testimony unites in one river of evidence that the theology of the Old and New Testament and the theology of the early church was not only premillennial, but that its premillennialism was practically undisputed except by heretics and skeptics until the time of Augustine. The coming of Christ as the prelude for the establishment of a kingdom of righteousness on earth in fulfillment of the Old Testament kingdom prophecies was the almost uniform expectation, both of the Jews at the time of the incarnation and of the early church. This is essential premillennialism however it may differ in its details from its modern advanced counterpart. Old Testament supports the premillennial viewpoint and that the Jews at the time of Christ held just such views of the Old Testament.

Amillenarians have followed two main routes to escape the logical result of this admission. The first has been to hold that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament was wrong. This is essentially the position of Hamilton quoted above. While he admits, "In fact, the Jews were looking for just such a kingdom to be set up by the Messiah in Jerusalem,"[3] *Ibid.*, p. 39. he continues, "Jesus Himself, in speaking of that whole idea said, 'The kingdom of God is within (or, in the midst of) you' (Luke 17:21), thus contradicting the idea that it was to be an earthly, literal, Jewish kingdom." [4] *Loc. cit.* As he goes on to explain, the error in the premillennial interpretation is that they interpret the prophecies literally, just as the Jews did.

The other route followed by amillenarians is another expedient for disposing of the prophecies of the Old Testament without literal fulfillment. This line of thought is to admit that the Old Testament prophecies rightly promise the Jews a kingdom on earth as usually presented by premillenarians, but to cancel this promise on the ground that it was conditioned on faith and obedience. In other words, the promise will never be fulfilled because Israel failed. As Allis puts it, "...obedience is the precondition of blessing under all circumstances." [5] Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 33. He goes on to argue that obedience is the condition for fulfillment of all God's covenant relations, specifically the Abrahamic covenant, the Davidic covenant, and the Gospel of grace. [6] *Ibid.*, pp. 32-48.

These two lines of amillennial argument, are, of course, contradictory. One assumes that a literal interpretation is right but fulfillment is forfeited for disobedience. The other assumes that literal interpretation is wrong and therefore only spiritual fulfillment is to be expected. Amillenarians like Allis use both principles even though their respective premises nullify each other. It is plain that they are determined at all costs to dispose of these kingdom promises without being too particular as to what method is followed. Premillenarians hold, of course, that the promises are unconditional and to be interpreted literally, and that premillennialism as found in the New Testament confirms the premillennialism of the Old Testament in no

uncertain terms.

## Premillennialism in the New Testament

The answer to the amillennial objection to premillennial interpretation of the Old Testament is found in the New Testament in two principal forms. First, the expectation of the Jews for literal fulfillment of the kingdom promises is confirmed. Second, this confirmation proves that the Old Testament promises are unconditional as to ultimate literal fulfillment.

It has been noted that rightly or wrongly it was the universal expectation of the Jews that the kingdom promises would be literally fulfilled. What does the New Testament have to say about this expectation? In Luke 1:32-33, Mary is told by the angel, in relation to the child 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 forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.” In view of the common Jewish expectation, how would Mary interpret such a prophecy? It should certainly be clear that she would consider it a confirmation of the literal interpretation and literal fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. She would naturally expect that her child Jesus would sit on an earthly Davidic throne. In spite of the disobedience of Israel in the Old Testament, and the long years in which no one sat on the throne of David, here was confirmation of the precise expectation common among the Jews. Did Mary for one moment hold the amillennial view? Would she spiritualize this passage—the throne of David is God’s throne in heaven; the kingdom is a spiritual kingdom; Israel is synonymous with the church? Certainly not! It was totally foreign to her thinking. If the amillennialists are right, Mary was sadly deceived. The prophecy of the angel could hardly have been better worded to confirm the ordinary Jewish hope as well as the exact essentials of the premillennial position—the literal and earthly fulfillment of the Davidic covenant.

It is, of course, true that Christ taught much concerning the spiritual aspects of God’s kingdom. The Messianic kingdom on earth following the second advent by no means exhausts kingdom truth. The important point is, however, that whenever the precise kingdom promises of the Old Testament are introduced, these promises and their literal fulfillment are never denied, corrected, or altered, but are instead confirmed.

There is much positive evidence in the New Testament for premillennial teachings. It is clear that the Jews rejected Jesus Christ as their King and Messiah, not as their Savior, and in so doing fulfilled literally those prophecies dealing with His rejection and death. His rejection did not alter the kingdom promises, however. When the mother of James and John sought special privilege for her sons in the kingdom (Matt 20:20-23), her request was not denied on the ground that she had a mistaken idea of the kingdom, but rather that the privilege she requested was to be given to those chosen by the Father. Again Christ the night before His rejection and crucifixion told His disciples that they would sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel in the kingdom (Luke 22:29-30). In Acts 1:6, when the disciples wanted to know when the kingdom was going to be restored to Israel, they were not told that they were in error, that the kingdom would never be restored to Israel, but only that it was not for them to know the “times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power” (Acts 1:7). When Paul raises the question concerning the future of Israel, in Romans 9-11, and considers the possibility of God rescinding His promises to them as a nation and casting them off forever, he exclaims, “God forbid” (Rom 11:1). The whole tenor of Romans 9-11 is to the point that while Israel for the present is cut off the olive tree of blessing, Israel is scheduled to be restored at the second advent, when the Deliverer will come out of Zion. It is expressly stated in this regard that “the gifts and callings of God are without repentance” (Rom 11:29), i.e., that God will fulfill His purpose regarding the nation Israel.

The book of Revelation is, of course, the classic passage on premillennialism. Revelation, while subject to all types of scholarly abuse and divergent interpretation, if taken in its plain intent yields a simple outline of premillennial truth—first a time of great tribulation, then the second advent, the binding of Satan, the deliverance and blessing of the saints, a righteous government on earth for 1000 years, followed by the final judgments and the new heaven and new earth. The only method of interpretation of Revelation which has ever yielded a consistent answer to the question of its meaning is that which interprets the book, however symbolic, as having its general revelation plain, one to be fulfilled literally, and therefore subject to future fulfillment.

One of the most eloquent testimonies to premillennial truth is found in the absolute silence of the New Testament, and for

that matter the early centuries of the church, on any controversy over premillennial teaching. It is admitted that it was universally held by the Jews. It is often admitted that the early church was predominantly premillennial. Yet there is no record of any kind dealing with controversy. It is incredible that if the Jews and the early church were in such a serious error in their interpretation of the Old Testament and in their expectation of a righteous kingdom on earth following the second advent, that there should be no corrective, and that all the evidence should confirm rather than deny such an interpretation. The general context of the New Testament is entirely in favor of the premillennial viewpoint. The amillennial interpretation has not one verse of positive testimony in the New Testament and can be sustained only by spiritualizing the prophecies of the Old Testament as well as the teaching of the New.

## Extra-Biblical Premillennialism in the First Century

The available evidence in regard to the premillennialism of the first century is not extensive by most standards, but such evidence as has been uncovered points in one direction—the premillennial concept. Peters in his classic work, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, cites no less than fifteen advocates of premillennialism in the first century.[7] G. N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, I, 494-95. While his classification in some cases no doubt is debatable, in others it is undisputed. The notable testimony of Papias, who was associated with the Apostle John, is of special weight. Papias who lived in the first century and the beginning of the second lists as adherents of premillennialism Aristio, John the Presbyter and the Apostles Andrew, Peter, Philip, Thomas, James, John, and Matthew. He certainly was in a position to know their views, and his testimony is an important link in sustaining the fact that the disciples continued in the Jewish expectation of a kingdom on earth. Peters also lists as premillennarians Clement of Rome, Barnabas, Hermas, Ignatius, and Polycarp. In previous discussion of amillennialism, it was shown that the prevailing opinion of both amillennarians and premillennarians that Barnabas is premillennial in his views is fully justified. Hermas also is conceded by practically all parties as premillennial. In other words, there are clear and unmistakable evidences of premillennialism in the first century. Further, this viewpoint is linked extra-biblically with the apostles themselves. In contrast to these clear evidences, not one adherent, not one line of evidence is produced sustaining the idea that any first-century Christians held Augustinian amillennialism—that the interadvent period was the millennial. Further, there is no evidence whatever that premillennialism was even disputed. It was the overwhelming-majority view of the early church.

## Premillennialism in the Second Century

The second century like the first bears a sustained testimony to the premillennial character of the early church. Even the amillennarians claim no adherents whatever by name to their position in the second century except in the allegorizing school of interpretation which arose at the very close of the second century. Premillennialism was undisputed for the first ninety years of the second century. Among those who can be cited in this century as holding premillennialism Peters names Pothinus, Justin Martyr, Melito, Hegesippus, Tatian, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Apollinaris.[8] *Ibid.*, I, 495-96. Of these Justin Martyr (100-168) is quite outspoken. He wrote: “But I and whatsoever Christians are orthodox in all things do know that there will be a resurrection of the flesh, and a thousand years in the city of Jerusalem, built, adorned, and enlarged, according as Ezekiel, Isaiah, and other prophets have promised. For Isaiah saith of this thousand years (ch. 65:17), ‘Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind; but be ye glad and rejoice in those which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem to triumph, and my people to rejoice,’ etc. Moreover, a certain man among us, whose name is John, being one of the twelve apostles of Christ, in that revelation which was shown to him prophesied, that those who believe in our Christ shall fulfil a thousand years at Jerusalem; and after that the general, and in a word, the everlasting resurrection, and last judgment of all together. Whereof also our Lord spake when He said, that therein they shall neither marry, nor be given in marriage, but shall be equal with the angels, being made the sons of the resurrection of God.”[9] *Ibid.*, I, 480.

While even modern premillennarians might not accept the details of Justin’s interpretation, the notable fact is that he clearly states the essentials of premillennialism—the second advent, followed by a thousand-year reign and the separating of the resurrections before and after the millennium. Further, Justin declares that this view which he advocates is generally accepted as the orthodox view of the church. Peters accordingly cites the conclusion of Semisch in Herzog’s cyclopaedia, “Chiliasm constituted in the sec. century so decidedly an article of faith that Justin held it up as a criterion of perfect

orthodoxy.”[10] *Loc. cit.*

The testimony of Justin is by no means unsustained by others, as Peters shows. Pothinus taught his churches at Lyons and Vienne premillennial doctrine which was continued by Irenaeus his successor. Melito, the bishop of Sardis, is declared a premillenarian by Shimeall in his *Reply*, based on Jerome and Genadius. Tertullian is generally regarded as a premillenarian. Others are less certain but the evidence, such as it is, seems to point to their holding similar positions.

In general, the second century, then, has a similar testimony to the first. All characters who have anything to say on the subject are premillennial and this is set forth as the orthodox opinion of the church. Those who may have denied it were classified as heretics, not simply for being opposed to premillennialism but for other reasons. The first opposition to premillennialism did not become vocal until the opening of the third century. Amillenarians and postmillenarians have not only no positive evidence in favor of their position but no evidence that there was even a reasonable minority in the church contending against premillennialism. Apparently no one of the orthodox Fathers thought of challenging this important doctrine in the first two centuries.

## Premillennialism in the Third Century

In the third century premillennialism began its historic decline, and it is admitted by all that opposition arose to premillennial ideas. Opponents of premillennialism are found in Gaius, Clement, Origen, Dionysius, and others. The form in which the attack came consisted in the adoption of the allegorizing method of interpreting Scripture in a manner which is no credit to amillennialism. Rutgers, though a determined foe of premillennialism, analyzes Clement, for instance, as follows: “Clement, engrossed and charmed by Greek philosophy, applied this erroneous allegorical method to Holy Writ. It was a one-sided emphasis: opposed to the real, the visible, phenomenal, spacial and temporal. A Platonic idealistic philosophy could not countenance carnalistic, sensualistic conceptions of the future as that advanced by chiliasm. It shook the very foundations on which chiliasm rested. Robertson observed that ‘it loosed its [chiliasm’s] sheet-anchor,—naïve literalism in the interpretation of Scripture.’”[11] W. H. Rutgers, *Premillennialism in America*, p. 64.

It is not surprising that opposition to premillennialism should arise. All forms of true doctrine have opposition and even the majority view in the history of doctrine is not necessarily the right one. The point of great significance is the form in which the opposition arose. It was not the product of orthodox studies in the Scripture, nor of the application of tried and true hermeneutics. It was rather the subversion of the plain meaning of Scripture not only as applied to the millennial question but all other areas of doctrine. The church today with one voice condemns all of the early opponents of premillennialism as heretics. Opposition to premillennialism had its rise in the attackers of true Scriptural doctrine, and it was not until the time of Augustine (354-430) that one reputable adherent of amillennialism can be cited. The opposition of premillennialism in the third century is no asset to amillennialism. While amillenarians may hail the conclusions of the enemies of premillennialism, they accept neither the general method nor the theology of those who participated in the attack. Usually, like Allis, amillenarians abandon the early centuries as a lost cause and begin with Augustine.

The third century had its own continued witness to premillennialism, however. Among those who can be cited are Cyprian (200-258), Commodian (200-270), Nepos (230-280), Coracion (230-280), Victorinus (240-303), Methodius (250-311), and Lactantius (240-330). Some of these like Commodian and Nepos are undisputed premillenarians. Nepos early recognized the heretical tendencies of the Alexandrian school of theology, which was the first effective opponent of premillennialism, and he attacked them with vigor. Methodius is conceded as premillenarian by Whitby himself. It is clear, however, that a rising tide of opposition was beginning to manifest itself against premillennialism, and while the church managed to extricate itself from much of the other bad doctrine of the Alexandrian school, premillennialism became in time one of the fatalities.

## Premillennialism from the Third Century to Modern Times

All admit that premillennialism after the third century waned and lost its hold on the majority of the church. It was the time of the rising strength of the Roman Church. Both the theological and political atmosphere was against it. While there was a

continued minority who held premillennialism both within and without the Roman Church, they were not very vocal and were quite ineffectual in continuing a strong testimony. The Reformers, while returning to true doctrine in many areas, accepted Augustine as the starting point for their theology, and for the most part accepted without much consideration his opposition to premillennialism. The fact that premillennialism was held by some fanatical sects did not give it much standing. It remained for the renewal of Scriptural studies some time after the Reformation to turn the attention of a large portion of the church again to the premillennial question. The last hundred years have brought premillennialism out of its partial eclipse, and among those who accept the inspiration of Scripture it continues to be an area of lively discussion. Most Bible institutes as well as some theological seminaries are today propagating premillennial truth, and scores of evangelical preachers, teachers, and missionaries, as well as widespread publications present premillennialism.

## Modern Premillennialism

The general features of modern premillennialism are highly significant and need to be outlined before assuming the larger task of the analysis and defense of premillennial doctrine. Even a casual observer of the premillennial movement in the twentieth century can see certain important tendencies.

*Infallibility of Scripture.* Premillennialism is based on the thesis of the infallibility of Scripture. It stands or falls not only on the method of interpretation of Scripture, but also on the question of the infallibility of the Holy Scripture. For this reason, premillennialism is entirely confined to those who are conservative in their general theological position. Premillennialism has always been the foe of liberal theology and of unbelief in the Scriptures. It has often been attacked for this very reason. Much of the modern zeal of its opponents has not arisen in love for doctrinal purity, but in hatred of conservative Biblical theology. To be a premillennialist exposes one at once to all who have departed from conservative theology. Premillennialism remains a bulwark against the inroads of modern theology.

*Literal interpretation.* Modern premillennialism is dependent upon the principle of literal interpretation. Premillennialism is a result of the application of this method to Scriptural interpretation. It is accordingly the foe of modern liberal spiritualization of all areas of theology as well as the more confined spiritualization of conservative amillennialists. The literal method of interpretation is also vitally related to Biblical dispensationalism. The recognition of Biblical dispensations and the proper statement of dispensational distinctions is not in itself a method of interpretation but rather a result of a method—the application of the literal method. Anti-dispensationalists are always guilty of various degrees of spiritualization of Scripture. The dispensational method is the literal method. In this connection it should also be noted that extremes in dispensational distinctions do not have their rise in a more rigid literal method, but rather in the area of general interpretation. Extreme dispensationalism which divides the interadvent period into Jewish and Gentile churches, and makes much of the New Testament non-applicable to modern churches, is not more or less literal than ordinary dispensationalism. It is misapplication of the literal method rather than its proper use.

*Evangelicalism.* Premillennialism has been definitely an evangelical movement. While often charged with pessimism regarding this world and with “other-worldliness,” premillennialism has been a large factor in modern effective Gospel preaching. A premillennialist is usually a believer in the orthodox Gospel and an adherent of Biblical theology in all major areas. Premillennialism among other things has opposed legalism or the Galatian error as it exists today and has upheld the doctrine of grace both as the ground of salvation and as a rule of life for the believer.

*Opposition to ecclesiasticism.* Premillennialism has tended to be more independent of human and ecclesiastical opinions and more inclined to exalt the Scriptures and the guidance of the Holy Spirit as a basis for conduct. The modern tendency to exalt church programs often pursued in the energy of the flesh rather than in the power of the Spirit, and the trend to exalt submission to church authority rather than to the Holy Spirit have had no encouragement from premillennialism. Premillennialism has supported exegetical preaching, informal church services, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and extemporaneous prayers in contrast to the ritualism, formalism, and mechanical tendency of modern Christianity.

*Emphasis on prophetic studies.* It is transparent that premillennialism has also exalted the study of prophetic truth. In contrast to the common neglect of even the essential doctrines of the second advent, heaven, hell, and final judgment,

usually omitted from liberal theological preaching, premillennialism has focused the white light of careful investigation on Scriptural teachings concerning future things. Prophetic Bible conferences are inevitably premillennial in their doctrine. Neither amillennialism nor postmillennialism ever aroused much interest in prophecy.

Such is the historical context of modern premillennialism. Rooted in the Old and New Testaments, a product of literal interpretation, nurtured by the Apostles and the early church, eclipsed for centuries by the dark shadows of pagan philosophies and allegorizing methods of interpretation, emerging once more as a dominant strain in Biblical theology in these eschatological times, premillennialism is more than a theory, more than a doctrine. It is a system of Biblical interpretation which alone honors the Word of God as infallibly inspired, literally interpreted, and sure of literal fulfillment. It has stirred the coals of evangelicalism, created interest in Biblical study, and constituted a preparation of God's people for the coming of the Lord for His saints. Premillennial truth has been an inestimable blessing to those who have received it. To them the Bible has become a living book to be interpreted in its ordinary sense. It is significant that the Bible study movements have usually been premillennial, and institutions which emphasize the study of the text of Scripture, as illustrated in the Bible institute movement, have often been an integral part of the premillennial movement.

The larger task of examining the foundations of Biblical premillennialism remains before us. The method of approach will be first of all general, then specific, and we trust with profit to the readers.

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 11

### Part 11: The Theological Context of Premillennialism

The oft-repeated charge that premillennialism is only a dispute over the interpretation of Revelation 20 is both understatement and a serious misrepresentation of the facts. Opponents of premillennialism delight to point out that the reference to the thousand years is found only in Revelation 20. Warfield observes in a footnote, “‘Once, and only once,’ says the ‘Ency. Bibl.,’ 3095, ‘in the New Testament we hear of a millennium.’”[1] B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines*, p. 643. The issues of premillennialism cannot be so simplified. The issues are neither trivial nor simple. Premillennialism is rather a system of theology based on many Scriptures and with a distinctive theological context. The reckless charge of Landis that European premillennialism is based only on Ezekiel 40-48 and that American premillennialism is based only on Revelation 20:1-7 is as unfair as his more serious charge that “actually their bases are both contra-Biblical,” and that premillennialism “is a fungus growth of first-century Pharisaic rabbinism.”[2] Ira D. Landis, *The Faith of Our Fathers on Eschatology*. Most opponents of premillennialism have enough perspective to see that premillennialism has its own Biblical and theological context and that its origin in the early church as well as its restoration in modern times is based on Biblical and theological studies. It is the purpose of this phase of the study of premillennialism to examine the general features of premillennial theology in contrast to opposing views. Premillennialism involves a distinctive principle of interpretation of Scripture, a different concept of the present age, a distinct doctrine of Israel, and its own teaching concerning the second advent and millennial kingdom. Origen, the father of amillenarianism, most certainly did. Conservative amillenarians would, however, feel perfectly justified in proceeding to spiritualize passages speaking of a future righteous government on earth, of Israel’s restoration as a national and political entity, of Israel’s regathering to Palestine, and of Christ reigning literally upon the earth for a thousand years. Their justification is that these doctrines are absurd and impossible and that therefore they must be spiritualized. The wish is father of the interpretation, therefore, and amillennial interpretation of Scripture abundantly illustrates this.

While professing to confine spiritualization to prophecy, actually they invade other fields. For instance they tend to spiritualize Israel to mean the church and make David’s throne to be the throne of God in heaven. They hold up to ridicule as extremists those who want to interpret references to Israel literally. As Allis writes with considerable inaccuracy, “Carrying to an almost unprecedented extreme that literalism which is characteristic of Millenarianism, they [the Brethren Movement] insisted that Israel must mean Israel, and that the kingdom promises in the Old Testament concern Israel and are to be fulfilled to Israel literally.”[4] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 218. In his zeal to load premillenarians with an extreme position, Allis finds it convenient to forget that the postmillennial Charles Hodge and the amillennial Professor William Hendricksen of Calvin Seminary both interpret reference to Israel in Scripture as belonging to God’s ancient people, Israel, not to a Gentile church.

Premillenarians, on the other hand, insist that one general rule of interpretation should be applied to all areas of theology and that prophecy does not require spiritualization any more than other aspects of truth. They hold that this rule is the literal, grammatical-historical method. By this it is meant that a passage should be taken in its literal sense, in keeping with the grammatical meaning of the words and forms. History is history, not allegory. Facts are facts. Prophesied future events are just what they are prophesied. Israel means Israel, earth means earth, heaven means heaven.

*Problems of the literal method.* Attacks on premillennialism which recognize the central importance of the literal method of interpretation delight to show that premillenarians do not always interpret Scripture literally either. Landis asks, “How literal are the literalists?”[5] Landis, *op. cit.*, p. 45. Allis confuses typical with spiritual interpretation and charges that premillennial use of typology destroys the literal principle. He writes, “While Dispensationalists are extreme literalists, they

are very inconsistent ones. They are literalists in interpreting prophecy. But in the interpreting of history, they carry the principle of typical interpretation to an extreme which has rarely been exceeded by the most ardent allegorizers.”[6] Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 21. True typical interpretation, of course, always involves literal interpretation first. In drawing typical truth from the Old Testament sacrifices, for instance, the interpreter takes for granted the historical existence of the sacrifice. If Joseph is taken as a type of Christ, his historical life is assumed. It is surprising that a scholar of Allis’ proportions should be confused on such a simple hermeneutical distinction. The dispute highlights, however, some of the problems of the use of the literal method.

Premillennarians recognize that all Scripture cannot be interpreted literally. All areas of theology are sometimes revealed in Scripture under symbolic terms. Such passages, however, are usually clearly identified. For instance, the “rod out of the stem of Jesse” and the “Branch” which “shall grow out of his roots” is understood by all to refer symbolically to Christ. But when it states that this “Branch” is the one who “shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked,” it is clear from that context that a literal prophecy of judgment on the wicked in the earth at the second advent is intended even though some of the expressions are figurative. While the expression “rod of his mouth” is clearly figurative, such simple expressions as “earth” in the context of this passage in Isaiah 11 cannot be spiritualized on the same grounds. We are not free to make “earth” arbitrarily an equivalent for heaven as many amillenarians do, nor can we speak of the regathering of Israel “from the four corners of the earth” (Isa 11:12) as the conversion of Gentiles and the progress of the church. While the expression “four corners” is figurative, the word “earth” is not. In other words, figures of speech which are clearly identified as such give no warrant whatever to spiritualize words and expressions which can be taken in their ordinary meaning.

*The literal method sustained by literal fulfillment.* The literal method of interpreting prophecy has been fully justified by the history of fulfillment. The most unlikely prophecies surrounding the birth of Christ, His person, His life and ministry, His death and resurrection have all been literally fulfilled. The prophetic vision of Daniel, however couched in symbols and dreams, has had the most concrete fulfillment down to the present hour in the history of Gentile nations. Hundreds if not thousands of prophecies have had literal fulfillment. A method that has worked with such success in the past is certainly worthy of projection into the future.

The interpreter of prophecy has, therefore, no more warrant to spiritualize prophecy than any other area of theology. If the details of the virgin birth, the character of the miracles of Christ, His very words on the cross, His form of execution, the circumstances of His burial, and His resurrection from the dead could be explicitly prophesied in the Old Testament, certainly there is no *a priori* reason for rejecting the literal interpretation of prophecy concerning His future righteous government on earth. The literal method is the method recognized in the fulfillment of prophecy and is the mainspring of the premillennial interpretation of the Scriptures.

*The question of relative difficulty of interpreting prophecy.* It may be admitted that there are problems in the interpretation of prophecy which are peculiar to this field. While the problems differ in character from the interpretation of history or theological revelation, they do not consist in the choice of spiritual or literal interpretation. It is not so much a question of whether the prophecy will be fulfilled, but rather concerning the unrevealed details of time and circumstance. While premillennarians have sometimes been guilty of making prophetic interpretation appear as too simple a process, amillenarians have erred in the other direction. After all, interpreting Scripture on such subjects as predestination, the decree of God, the doctrine of the Trinity, the person of the incarnate Christ, the sufferings of Christ on the cross, and similar doctrines is certainly difficult even though in the realm of specific revelation and historic fulfillment. The theologian should no more turn to spiritualization of Scripture to solve the doctrinal difficulties in these areas than he should spiritualize prophecy to fit a denial of a millennial kingdom on earth. Difficulty or even seeming contradiction is not sufficient justification for spiritualization. If the incongruous elements of the human and the divine in Christ can be accepted literally in spite of their seeming contradiction, the elements of prophecy which may seem confusing should not be sacrificed on the altar of spiritualization to remove the problem that arises from literal interpretation.

A general principle guiding the interpretation of prophecy is quite clear in the Scripture. This principle is that the whole doctrine of prophecy should be allowed to be the guide for the interpretation of details. The main elements of prophecy are far more clear than some of the details. Difficult passages are often solved by a study of related Scriptures. The Book of

Revelation, while admittedly difficult to interpret, has its symbols drawn from other portions of Scripture, and many questions of interpretation can be answered with the larger context of the entire Bible.

*The problem of the time element in prophecy.* One of the problems of interpretation of prophecy is that it involves time relationships. Events widely separated in fulfillment are often brought together in prophetic vision. Thus the first coming and the second coming of Christ are pictured in the same Scriptural context. Isaiah 61:1-2 as quoted in part by Christ in Luke 4:16-19 is an illustration of this. In the quotation in Luke, Christ quoted only the first part of the Isaiah passage, stopping just before the elements that dealt with the second coming. We can therefore expect in Old Testament prophecy the complete spanning of the present age with no inkling of the millenniums that separate the first and second advent. On the other hand, when time elements are included, they are intended to be taken literally. Hence, Daniel's "seventy weeks" are subject to literal interpretation even though the interval between the sixty-ninth and the seventieth week is only hinted at by Daniel himself. The rule does not justify spiritualization of that which is specifically revealed.

*The problem of partial fulfillment.* This, in a word, is the partial fulfillment of a prophecy first, followed by the complete fulfillment later. In Luke 1:31-33, for instance, there was fulfillment of the first part of the prophecy in the incarnation, but the prediction that Christ would rule over Israel on the throne of David forever has had no fulfillment. Amillenarians have succumbed to the temptation to spiritualize the throne of David. Such an interpretation violates the very integrity of Scripture. Mary certainly believed the prediction to refer to the literal kingdom on earth prophesied in the Old Testament. A spiritual throne in heaven, God's own throne, in no wise fulfills the prediction.

*Premillennial principles of literal interpretation justified.* The general features of premillennial interpretation are therefore evident. Its method is literal interpretation except for figures plainly intended to be symbols. Prophecies are therefore to be taken literally, the exact interpretation following the pattern of the law of fulfillment established by prophecies already fulfilled and in keeping with the entire doctrine. Time relationships in prophecy are seen to include the literal interpretation of time elements when given and at the same time the prophetic vision is seen to present events widely separated in time in the same revelation. Prophecies fulfilled in part are found to sustain the principle of literal fulfillment, with a partial fulfillment first and complete literal fulfillment to follow. Prophecy in general must follow the same hermeneutical principles of interpretation which govern other areas of theology.

## **The Premillennial Concept of the Present Age**

The immediate and practical importance of premillennial interpretation can be seen at once in the comparison of concepts of the present age advanced by the various millennial views. Postmillennialism usually interprets the prophecies of the coming kingdom of righteousness on earth as being subject to a somewhat literal fulfillment in the period just preceding the second advent, a period still future from the contemporary viewpoint. This interpretation has almost vanished among contemporary conservative theologians, being continued only in the evolutionary principle of continued world-improvement to which some still resolutely cling in spite of trends to the contrary. Amillenarians, on the other hand, regard the kingdom prophecies as being fulfilled now, in the present age, either on earth or in heaven, or both. The premillennial interpretation denies both the postmillennial and amillennial views, affirming that the kingdom on earth will follow, not precede the second advent of Christ.

The premillennial concept of the present age makes the inter-advent period unique and unpredicted in the Old Testament. The present age is one in which the gospel is preached to all the world. Relatively few are saved. The world becomes, in fact, increasingly wicked as the age progresses. The premillennial view holds no prospects of a golden age before the second advent, and presents no commands to improve society as a whole. The apostles are notably silent on any program of either political, social, moral, or physical improvement of the unsaved world. Paul made no effort to correct social abuses or to influence the political government for good. The program of the early church was one of evangelism and Bible teaching. It was a matter of saving souls out of the world rather than saving the world. It was neither possible nor in the program of God for the present age to become the kingdom of God on earth.

Central in the purpose of the present age in the premillennial view is the formation of the church, the body of Christ, out of

believers in the gospel. This body of believers is quite distinct from Israel in the Old Testament and is not simply a revamped Judaism. The truth regarding the church as the body of Christ is declared to be a mystery, that is, a truth not revealed in the Old Testament. Composed of Jew and Gentile on an equal basis, and resting on New Testament promises of grace and salvation in Christ, the new entity is a new creation of God, formed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, indwelt by the Spirit of God, united to Christ as the human body is united to its head. The main body of premillennarians regard the church as beginning at Pentecost, having its program and formation in the present age, and a prophetic future all its own, not to be confused with Israel or Old Testament saints.

## **The Premillennial Concept of Israel**

There have been, in the main, three interpretations of the theological concept of Israel in Protestant theology. One of these, which can be identified with John Calvin, is the idea that the church is the true Israel and therefore inherits Israel's promises. This is the viewpoint advocated by amillennarians. Allis considers it the only possible amillennarian position. It considers Israel nationally and individually set aside forever and his promises of blessings transferred to the church. Under this concept there is no future hope for Israel whatever.

Some amillennarians such as Prof. William Hendricksen and some conservative postmillennarians such as Charles Hodge hold that Israel's promises of blessings will be fulfilled to those of Israel in the flesh who come to Christ and become part of the Christian church. The promises are to be fulfilled, then, to Israel, but to Israel in the church. Hodge takes this as a final triumph of the gospel and even envisions some regathering of Israel for this purpose. Under both of these forms of interpretation, no post-advent kingdom is required to fulfill Israel's promises. All will be fulfilled in the present age.

It is clear, however, to all that many of the promises cannot be literally applied to present earth conditions. Two expedients are followed by the amillennarian and postmillennarian interpretation. Some promises are cancelled as having been conditional in the first place. Others are spiritualized to fit the pattern of the present age. This interpretation is based upon a somewhat contradictory set of principles. One view is that the promises to Israel were never intended to be taken literally and hence are rightly spiritualized to fit the church. The other is that they were literal enough, but cancelled because of Israel's sin. The concept of Israel prevailing among amillennarians and postmillennarians is therefore confused and inherently contradictory. There does not seem to be any norm or central consistency except in their denial of a political and national future for Israel after the second advent. What unity exists in their system rests upon this denial.

The premillennial view concerning Israel is quite clear and simple. The prophecies given to Israel are viewed as literal and unconditional. God has promised Israel a glorious future and this will be fulfilled after the second advent. Israel will be a glorious nation, protected from her enemies, exalted above the Gentiles, the central vehicle of the manifestation of God's grace in the millennial kingdom. In the present age, Israel has been set aside, her promises held in abeyance, with no progress in the fulfillment of her program. This postponement is considered no more difficult than the delay of forty years in entering the promised land. Promises may be delayed in fulfillment but not cancelled. All concede that a literal interpretation of Israel's promises in the Old Testament present just such a picture. Again it resolves into a problem of literal interpretation and the defense of this interpretation as reasonable and consistent. The preservation of Israel as a racial entity and the resurrection of Israel as a political entity are twin miracles of the twentieth century which are in perfect accord with the premillennial interpretation. The doctrine of Israel remains one of the central features of premillennialism.

## **The Premillennial Concept of the Second Advent**

The general facts concerning the premillennial viewpoint of the second advent are well known. Premillennarians hold to a literal, bodily, visible, and glorious return of Christ to the earth, fulfilling the many Scriptural prophecies of this event. They hold that this event is the occasion for the deliverance and judgment of Israel, the downfall and judgment of the Gentiles, the inauguration of the kingdom of righteousness on earth. In contrast to both amillennialism and postmillennialism, they hold that the coming of Christ is before the millennium. Satan is bound at this time. The curse of sin is lifted from the material world. Righteousness, peace, and prosperity become the rule. Jerusalem becomes the capital for the whole world. The kingdom continues for one thousand years and then is merged into eternity attended by catastrophic events—the destruction

of the present earth and heavens, the judgment of the wicked dead who are then raised, the establishment of the saints of all ages in the new earth and new heavens. All of these events are interpreted literally by the premillenarian and constitute the blueprint of things to come.

Premillennarians often distinguish between the second advent and the rapture of the church. Usually Scripture is interpreted to sustain the teaching that the rapture comes before the tribulation time, separated from the second advent by a period of about seven years. Some few hold that the rapture comes in the middle of the tribulation, the mid-tribulation theory. Others hold to the post-tribulation view which identifies the rapture with the second advent proper. These three premillennial views will be discussed in full later, under consideration of premillennial eschatology.

## Conclusion

It should be clear from this survey of the field that premillennialism is a distinct system of theology. Opponents of premillennialism are right in part when they charge that premillennialism is essentially different from other forms of theology. The chief differences arise in ecclesiology, eschatology, and hermeneutics. Opponents of premillennialism are wrong when they claim that premillennialism is new, modern, or heretical. Even partisans in the millennial argument usually agree that premillennarians are evangelical, true to Biblical doctrines, and opposed to modern defections from the faith of our fathers.

The task that remains is the large undertaking of presenting the Scriptural evidence for premillennialism in a constructive way, showing that it is consistent with itself and its hermeneutical principles, and that it is the best system of interpretation of the entire Scriptures. The approach will be through the Biblical covenants, beginning with God's covenant with Abraham, which has become increasingly the crux of the millennial issue. The literal method of interpretation will be tested by its practical use in seeking solution of the millennial problem.

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# Millennial Series

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## Chapter 12

### Part 12: The Abrahamic Covenant and Premillennialism

It is recognized by all serious students of the Bible that the covenant of God with Abraham is one of the important and determinative revelations of Scripture. It furnishes the key to the entire Old Testament and reaches for its fulfillment into the New. In the controversy between premillenarians and amillenarians, the interpretation of this covenant more or less settles the entire argument. The analysis of its provisions and the character of their fulfillment[1] Cf. "The Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 102:405, January-March 1945, pp. 27-36, by the author. set the mold for the entire body of Scriptural truth.

Most of the discussions on the issue are distinguished for their disregard of the specific provisions of the covenant. Albertus Pieters in his closely reasoned book on this subject[2] Albertus Pieters, *The Seed of Abraham* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950), pp. 161. is no exception. Like Louis Berkhof,[3] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941), p. 277. Oswald Allis,[4] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1945), pp. 32ff. and other amillenarians, he finds it convenient and suited to his purpose to overlook the details of the promise and seize upon its general promises of blessings. This is of course necessary for the amillennial interpretation which does not provide any fulfillment of the details ignored. The premillennial interpretation on the other hand is able to account for the entire prophecy and its ultimate complete fulfillment.

The issue, in a word, is the question of whether Israel as a nation and as a race has a prophesied future. A literal interpretation of the Abrahamic Covenant involves the permanent existence of Israel as a nation and the fulfillment of the promise that the land should be their everlasting possession. Amillenarians generally deny this. Premillenarians affirm it. What, then, are the provisions of the covenant with Abraham and do they promise what premillenarians affirm?

### The Provisions of the Covenant

The language of the Abrahamic Covenant is plain and to the point. The original covenant is given in Genesis 12:1-3, and there are three confirmations and amplifications as recorded in Genesis 13:14-17; 15:1-7 ; and 17:1-18 . Some of the promises are given to Abraham personally, some to Abraham's seed, and some to Gentiles, or "all families of the earth" (Gen 12:3).

*The promise to Abraham.* Abraham himself is promised that he would be the father of a great nation (Gen 12:2), compared to the dust of the earth and the stars of the heaven in number (Gen 13:16; 15:5 ), and including kings and nations other than the "seed" itself (Gen 17:6). God promises His personal blessing on Abraham. His name shall be great and he himself shall be a blessing. All of this has had already the most literal fulfillment and continues to be fulfilled.

*The promise to Abraham's seed.* In addition to the promises to Abraham, the covenant includes blessings for Abraham's seed. The nation itself should be great (Gen 12:2) and innumerable (Gen 13:16; 15:5 ). The nation is promised possession of the land. Its extensive boundaries are given in detail (Gen 15:18-21). In connection with the promise of the land, the Abrahamic Covenant itself is expressly called "everlasting" (Gen 17:7) and the possession of the land is defined as "an everlasting possession" (Gen 17:8). It should be immediately clear that this promise guarantees both the everlasting continuance of the seed as a nation and its everlasting possession of the land.

Miscellaneous promises are included in the covenant. God is to be the God of Abraham's seed. It is prophesied that they would be afflicted, as fulfilled in the years in Egypt, and that afterwards they would "come out with great substance" (Gen 15:14). In the promise to Abraham, "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed," it is anticipated that the seed should be a channel of this blessing. In particular this is fulfilled in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

All the promises to the "seed" in Genesis are references to the physical seed of Abraham. General promises of blessing to Abraham's seed seem to include all his physical lineage, but it is clear that the term is used in a narrower sense in some instances. Eliezer of Damascus, while according to the customs of the day regarded as a child of Abraham because born in his house, is nevertheless disqualified because he is not the physical seed of Abraham (Gen 15:2). Further, not all the physical descendants of Abraham qualify for the promises to the seed. Ishmael is put aside. When Abraham pleads with God, "O that Ishmael might live before thee!" God replies, "Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him" (Gen 17:18-19). The line of the seed and its promises is narrowed to the one son of Abraham. Later when Jacob and Esau are born, God in sovereign choice chooses the younger as the father of the twelve patriarchs and confirms the covenant to Jacob. The particular Abrahamic promises and blessings are thereafter channelled through the twelve tribes.

While the promises to the "seed" must be limited in their application according to the context, it is clear that much of the general blessings attending the Abrahamic Covenant such as the general blessing of God upon men is larger in its application. Thus the sign of circumcision (Gen 17:10-14, 23-27) is administered not only to Isaac later, but also to Ishmael and the men in Abraham's house either born in the house or bought with money. Circumcision is wider in its application than the term *seed*, as far as the use in Genesis is concerned.

*The promise to Gentiles.* As a part of the Abrahamic Covenant, "all families of the earth" are promised blessing (Gen 12:3). It is not specified what this blessing shall be. As a general promise it is probably intended to have a general fulfillment. Abraham himself has certainly been a blessing to all nations and has the distinction of being honored alike by Jew, Mohammedan, and Christian. The seed of Abraham or the nation of Israel itself has been a great blessing as the channel of divine revelation and the historic illustration of God's dealings with men. The seed of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, has also been a blessing to all nations. The blessing bestowed includes not only the salvation of many but the revelation of God, the revelation of moral law, and the many by-products of Biblical Judaism and Christianity. The promise has already been abundantly fulfilled.

A solemn part of the covenant as it deals with the Gentiles is the provision, "I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee" (Gen 12:3). This of course would be true even of an Israelite, but the primary application is to Gentiles. Long sections of the Old Testament pronouncing judgment upon the Gentiles for their ill-treatment of Israel enlarge on this provision. History has recorded graphic fulfillment in the wrecks of Nineveh, Babylon, and Rome, to say nothing of smaller groups and peoples. Down to modern times, the nation that has persecuted the Jew has paid dearly for it.

*Further distinctions.* The promises to Abraham, to Abraham's seed, and to "all families of the earth" are to be distinguished clearly. It breeds utter confusion to ignore these Scriptural divisions and to muddle the whole by reducing it to a general promise. Not only should these distinctions be observed, but it should be carefully noted what is left out of the covenant. While Abraham is personally justified by faith because of his trust in God's promise concerning his seed, it is obvious that the Abrahamic Covenant itself is not the gospel of salvation even though the promised blessing anticipated the gospel (cf. Gal 3:8). Those in the covenant are promised that God will be their God in the general and providential sense. It is true that Christ is the fulfillment of the promise of blessing to all nations. But the covenant does not contain the covenant of redemption, a revelation of the sacrifice of Christ, a promise of forgiveness of sin, a promise of eternal life, or any of the elements of salvation. The promise to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15 is, by way of example, a far clearer picture of the promise of redemption than any of the long passages dealing with the Abrahamic Covenant. While the Abrahamic Covenant is essentially gracious and promises blessings, it deals for the most part with physical blessings and with a physical seed. To make the covenant a phase or a statement of the covenant of redemption is hardly justified by the study of its precise provisions.

# Literal Versus Spiritual Interpretation

While the premillennial interpretation of the Abrahamic Covenant distinguishes the promises to Abraham, to Abraham's seed, and to "all families of the earth," the amillennial view largely blurs this distinction. In order to understand the amillennial view, it will be necessary to summarize its main arguments.

*The amillennial position.* Albertus Pieters in his recent work, *The Seed of Abraham*, has summarized the amillennial position as follows: "The expression 'Seed of Abraham,' in biblical usage, denotes that visible community, the members of which stand in relation to God through the Abrahamic Covenant, and thus are heirs to the Abrahamic promise." [5] Albertus Pieters, *op. cit.*, p. 20. In other words, all who are heirs of the covenant in any sense are the seed of Abraham. In discussing the circumcision of Abraham's entire house including the servants, Pieters concludes, "Yet they were all accounted, for covenant purposes, to be 'The Seed of Abraham.'" [6] *Ibid.*, p. 17. He states further in regard to the question of whether promises were made to Abraham's physical seed, "Whenever we meet with the argument that God made certain promises to the Jewish race, the above facts are pertinent. God never made any promises to any race at all, as a race. All His promises were to the continuing covenanted community, without regard to its racial constituents or to the personal ancestry of the individuals in it." [7] *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

The expression *seed of Abraham* under this interpretation loses its literal meaning and is considered the seed of Abraham only in a spiritual sense. Coupled with this spiritualizing of the terms is the general assumption that the covenant as a whole is entirely conditioned upon the faith of the individual. Hence the promise of everlasting possession of the land by the seed of Abraham is thrown out as having been forfeited by Israel's failures in the Old and New Testament. To all practical purposes the Abrahamic Covenant has its fulfillment in the church according to the amillennial viewpoint.

*The premillennial view of the covenant.* As distinguished from the amillennial position, the premillennial interpretation of the Abrahamic Covenant takes its provisions literally. In other words, the promises given to Abraham will be fulfilled by Abraham; the promises to Abraham's seed, will be fulfilled by his physical seed; the promises to "all families of the earth," will be fulfilled by Gentiles, or those not the physical seed. While possession of the land forever is the promise to the physical seed, the promise of blessing is to "all the families of the earth." Both are to be fulfilled exactly as promised.

While the premillennial position insists upon fulfillment of promises to Israel as the physical seed, and thereby its national preservation and future hope of possession of the land, the premillenarian recognizes that there is a spiritual as well as a natural seed of Abraham. The New Testament in numerous passages refers to the spiritual seed of Abraham. Abraham is called "the father of all them that believe" (Rom 4:11). In Galatians 3:7, it is noted, "Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham." Again in Galatians 3:29 it is revealed, "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." These passages teach beyond doubt that there is a spiritual seed of Abraham, those who like Abraham of old believe in God, and are children of faith.

Premillenarians also recognize the distinction between the natural and the spiritual seed within Israel itself. In Romans 9:6, this is stated in a few words, "For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel." This is defined later, "That is, They which are children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed" (Rom 9:8). Within Israel, then, there is a believing remnant who are both natural and spiritual children of Abraham. These inherit the promises.

There are, then, three different senses in which one can be a child of Abraham. First, there is the natural lineage, or natural seed. This is limited largely to the descendants of Jacob in the twelve tribes. To them God promises to be their God. To them was given the law. To them was given the land of Israel in the Old Testament. With them God dealt in a special way. Second, there is the spiritual lineage within the natural. These are the Israelites who believed in God, who kept the law, and who met the conditions for present enjoyment of the blessings of the covenant. Those who ultimately possess the land in the future millennium will also be of spiritual Israel. Third, there is the spiritual seed of Abraham who are not natural Israelites. Here is where the promise to "all the families of the earth" comes in. This is the express application of this phrase in Galatians 3:6-9, "Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. 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.” In other words, the children of Abraham (spiritually) who come from the “heathen” or the Gentiles fulfill that aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant which dealt with Gentiles in the first place, not the promises pertaining to Israel. The only sense in which Gentiles can be Abraham’s seed in the Galatians context is to be “in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). It follows: “And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29). They are Abraham’s seed in the spiritual sense only and heirs of the promise given “to all the families of the earth.”

While premillenarians can agree with amillenarians concerning the fact of a spiritual seed for Abraham which includes Gentiles, they deny that this fulfills the promises given to the natural seed or that the promises to the “seed of Abraham” are fulfilled by Gentile believers. To make the blessings promised all the nations the same as the blessings promised the seed of Abraham is an unwarranted conclusion.

The weakness of the amillennial position is shown by examination of their exegesis of such passages as Genesis 15:18-21, where the exact boundaries of the promised land are given, and the kindred passage in Genesis 17:7-8 where the covenant is called everlasting and the land is promised as an everlasting possession. Albertus Pieters, in his discussion of “The Seed of Abraham in the Patriarchal Period,”[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 11-23. finds it convenient to pass over these passages entirely. His argument is that modern Jews have lost their lineage and therefore nobody today is qualified to claim the promises given to the Jew anyway—a radical and questionable line of argument to say the least. Most amillenarians as well as premillenarians recognize the modern Jew as having some racial continuity with ancient Israel, however polluted by intermarriage with Gentiles.

*BSac* 108:432 (Oct 51) p. 422

Oswald Allis,[9] Oswald T. Allis, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-36. on the other hand, while an ardent amillenarian, faces these promises on an entirely different basis. His argument is that the promises have either been fulfilled literally for Israel or that they were conditional promises and Israel failed to meet the conditions. The contrast between the approach of Allis and that of Pieters illustrates that amillenarians are quite at odds among themselves not only on details but the main principles of their interpretation.

The issue which divides premillenarians and amillenarians in the interpretation of the Abrahamic Covenant is the familiar question of literal versus spiritualized interpretation. If taken in its ordinary literal sense, the sense which Abraham no doubt understood it, the covenant promised the land of Abraham’s seed as a lasting possession and along with this the promise of being in a special way the object of God’s care, protection, and blessing. The Scriptures give fully adequate indication that the Abrahamic Covenant was intended to be interpreted literally as indicated in its partial fulfillment and the frequent prophetic revelation of Israel’s glorious future and repossession of the land. Before considering this evidence, it is necessary first to examine the amillennial claim that the Abrahamic Covenant does not require literal fulfillment because it was intended to be fulfilled only if conditions were met. In other words, Israel’s failure being what it was, amillenarians feel that there is no need for the promises to be fulfilled. Only spiritual blessings are left and these are for those who are Abraham’s spiritual children.

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 13

### Part 13: The Abrahamic Covenant and Premillennialism

(Continued from the October-December Number, 1951)

{Editor's note: Footnotes in the original printed edition were numbered 10-15, but in this electronic edition are numbered 1-6 respectively.}

#### Is the Abrahamic Covenant Unconditional?

Amillenarians believe that the Abrahamic Covenant is based on certain conditions, and its fulfillment hinges on these conditions being met. Premillenarians hold that the Abrahamic Covenant is a declaration of God's intention which is not conditional upon the obedience of individuals or nations for its fulfillment—an unconditional plan of God.

As given in the Scriptures, the Abrahamic Covenant is hinged upon only one condition. This is given in Genesis 12:1, "Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee." The original covenant was based upon Abraham's obedience in leaving his homeland and going to the land of promise. No further revelation is given him until he was obedient to this command after the death of his father. Upon entering Canaan, the Lord immediately gave Abraham the promise of ultimate possession of the land (Gen 12:7), and subsequently enlarged and reiterated the original promises.

The one condition, having been met, no further conditions are laid upon Abraham; the covenant having been solemnly established is now dependent upon divine veracity for its fulfillment. A parallel can be found in the doctrine of eternal security for the believer in the present dispensation. Having once accepted Jesus Christ as Savior, the believer is assured a complete salvation and eternal bliss in heaven on a gracious principle quite independent of attaining a degree of faithfulness or obedience during this life. The original condition having been met, the promise continues without further conditions.

*Evidence that the covenant is unconditional.* The Scriptures afford a most complete line of evidence in support of the unconditional character of the covenant. (1) All Israel's covenants are unconditional except the Mosaic. The Abrahamic Covenant is expressly declared to be eternal and therefore unconditional in numerous passages (Gen 17:7, 13, 19; 1 Chron 16:17; Ps 105:10). The Palestinian Covenant is likewise declared to be everlasting (Ezek 16:60). The Davidic Covenant is described in the same terms (2 Sam 7:13, 16, 19; 1 Chron 17:12; 22:10; Isa 55:3; Ezek 37:25). The new covenant with Israel is also eternal (Isa 61:8; Jer 32:40; 50:5; Heb 13:20).

(2) Except for the original condition of leaving his homeland and going to the promised land, the covenant is made with no conditions whatever. It is rather a prophetic declaration of God of what will certainly come to pass, and is no more conditional than any other announced plan of God which depends upon God's sovereignty for its fulfillment.

(3) The Abrahamic Covenant is confirmed repeatedly by reiteration and enlargement. In none of these instances are any of the added promises conditioned upon the faithfulness of Abraham's seed or of Abraham himself. While God promises in some instances the larger aspects of the covenants in recognition of Abraham's faithfulness, nothing is said about it being conditioned upon the future faithfulness of either Abraham or his seed.

(4) The Abrahamic Covenant was solemnized by a divinely ordered ritual symbolizing the shedding of blood and passing between the parts of the sacrifice (Gen 15:7-21; Jer 34:18). This ceremony was given to Abraham as an assurance that his seed would inherit the land in the exact boundaries given to him in Genesis 15:18-21. No conditions whatever are attached to this promise in this context.

(5) To distinguish those who would inherit the promises as individuals from those who were only physical seed of Abraham, the visible sign of circumcision was given (Gen 17:9-14). One not circumcised was considered outside the promised blessing. The ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant and possession of the land by the seed is not hinged, however, upon faithfulness in the matter of circumcision. In fact the promises of the land were given before the rite was introduced.

(6) The Abrahamic Covenant was confirmed by the birth of Isaac and Jacob to both of whom the promises are repeated in their original form (Gen 17:19; 28:12-13 ). To them again no conditions were delineated for the fulfillment of the covenant. The added revelation is that the promised seed would be channeled through them.

(7) Notable is the fact that the reiterations of the covenant and the partial early fulfillments of the covenant are in spite of acts of disobedience. It is clear that on several instances Abraham strayed from the will of God, as for instance in his departure out of the land and sojourn in Egypt. Jacob has the promise given him in spite of his disobedience, deceit, and unbelief. In the very act of fleeing the land the promises are repeated to him.

(8) The later confirmations of the covenant are given in the midst of apostasy. Important is the promise given through Jeremiah that Israel as a nation will continue forever (Jer 31:36). The place of the new covenant given through Jeremiah in its relation to the Abrahamic Covenant and the extensive and numerous predictions in the Minor Prophets concerning Israel's regathering and restoration to fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant will be considered in later discussion. The very existence of this large body of Scripture is an important link in the proof of the unconditional character of the Abrahamic Covenant.

(9) The New Testament declares the Abrahamic Covenant immutable (Heb 6:13-18; cf. Gen 15:8-21). It was not only promised but solemnly confirmed by the oath of God.

(10) The entire Scriptural revelation concerning Israel and its future as contained in both the Old and New Testament, if interpreted literally, confirms and sustains the unconditional character of the promises given to Abraham.

There are then many and weighty reasons for considering the Abrahamic Covenant unconditional. The later discussion of the Davidic Covenant and the New Covenant constitutes a further indication of the unconditional character of God's promises to Abraham's seed. The fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant in history down to the present day adds its weight to all the other arguments. In spite of these important considerations, the amillennialist insists that the covenant must be interpreted spiritually and that it will never be completely fulfilled because of the failure to meet the supposed conditions.

*The amillennial argument for a conditional covenant.* The amillennial point of view almost takes for granted that the Abrahamic Covenant is subject to conditions. In fact the statement is frequently made that obedience is always the prerequisite for blessing. In the words of Oswald Allis: "It is true that, in the express terms of the covenant with Abraham, obedience is not stated as a condition. But that obedience was presupposed is clearly indicated by two facts. The one is that obedience is the precondition of blessing under all circumstances.... The second fact is that in the case of Abraham the duty of obedience is particularly stressed." [1] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 33. Allis is guilty here of begging the question with a very hasty dogmatism. It is not true that obedience is always the condition of blessing. The seed of Abraham have been disobedient in every moral category. Yet in spite of that disobedience they have fulfilled many of the promises of the covenant. The very principle of grace is that God blesses the unworthy. The individual is not saved on the ground of moral obedience or of attaining moral perfection. The security of the believer, a doctrine which Allis certainly believes, is quite independent of human worth or faithfulness. Allis is saying in effect that God can make no certain promises where human agency is concerned. As a Calvinist, where is Allis' doctrine of unconditional election? Is it not better to avoid such a sweeping universal and to recognize that, while covenants may be conditional as for instance the

Mosaic Covenant was, covenants can also be unconditional? The Abrahamic Covenant is a declaration of God's purpose and, while human agency is involved, the main point of the covenant is that God will fulfill it in spite of human failure.

Amillennarians while admitting that obedience is never made the condition of the covenant—which ought to be decisive in itself—point out that obedience is stressed. An examination of the various references to human obedience reveals that Abraham had promises reiterated and further revelation given concerning them because of his obedience. It is never stated or implied, however, that the covenant was in abeyance until Abraham was obedient. The role of obedience was important for individual blessing under the covenant. In other words, an individual could deprive himself of the immediate blessings of the covenant through gross disobedience. The point is that in spite of such individual actions the covenant would have its complete fulfillment. It is anticipated that there would be a godly remnant, as there was, in whom the covenant would have its complete fulfillment (cf. Gen 18:18-19); but in the renewal of the covenant to Isaac, the certainty of it is not built upon the future obedience of the seed of Abraham, but upon the past obedience of Abraham (Gen 26:3-5). In recognizing the obedience of Abraham in offering Isaac, God repeated the same promises given before (Gen 22:16-18). Obviously if these promises were conditioned on the worthiness of Abraham's seed, the large probability of human failure would have robbed the promises of any real hope of fulfillment.

It is of course anticipated in the sovereignty and foreknowledge of God that, to the extent that obedience entered into the fulfillment of the covenant, such obedience was predestined and determined. The agency and circumstances of the fulfillment of the covenant are not the important point. God was promising that the covenant would be fulfilled, and the premillenarian believes that it will be fulfilled exactly as promised.

Most of the other amillennial objections to considering the covenant unconditional stem from their main premise that all covenants are conditional. In support of this idea, numerous smaller claims are made. Attention is directed to Jonah's command to preach judgment on Nineveh, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4), a promise cancelled when Nineveh repented. The answer, of course, is that this is not a covenant but a warning. The very fact that Nineveh was brought to repentance shows that they understood it in this light. This at best is argument by analogy, and the circumstances show it is not a parallel case.

The judgment on Eli's house for its sin is cited by Allis[2] *Ibid.*, p. 32. to prove that an unstated condition is implied in every covenant (1 Sam 2:30 with Exod 29:9. Cf. Jer 18:1-10; Ezek 3:18-19; Exod 32:13ff). In this case, premillenarians will agree with the illustration, disagree with the principle which it is supposed to illustrate. The covenant with Eli's house was a part of the Mosaic Covenant, which all agree is a conditional covenant which was not intended to be eternal. This has no bearing whatever upon the Abrahamic Covenant. In God's dealings with nations other than Israel He is free to pluck up and cast down. In Israel's case, He has pledged His word, and Moses is quick to remind God of His unalterable covenant in the face of Israel's sin (Exod 32:13-14).

The rite of circumcision is cited as proving the covenant is conditional. All agree that the individual enjoyment of blessing under the covenant is to a large degree dependent upon the individual's faith and obedience. This is quite different than stating that the fulfillment of the covenant as a whole is conditioned upon obedience of the nation as a whole. This also explains what seems to Allis to be a contradiction, that C. I. Scofield taught that Israel must be in the land of promise to be fully blessed.[3] *Ibid.*, p. 34. The issue here again is individual blessing or blessing on any one generation of Israel. The question of ultimate fulfillment is not in view.

Esau is also cited by amillennarians as proof that the covenant is conditional. Allis says, "That Dispensationalists do not regard the Abrahamic covenant as wholly unconditional is indicated also by the fact that we never hear them speak of the restoration of Esau to the land of Canaan and to full blessing under the Abrahamic covenant.... But if the Abrahamic covenant was unconditional why is Esau excluded from the blessings of the covenant?"[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36. The answer is quite simple, of course, and Allis anticipates it somewhat in his discussion. The promises to Abraham are not fulfilled by all the natural seed of Abraham, but by *some* of them. Those who will fulfill the covenant descend from Jacob, and Esau is excluded. Allis should be reminded that Esau is excluded by solemn choice of God before obedience became an issue, a fact clearly brought out in Romans 9:11-13.

Allis in his argument changes pace quite rapidly in his next objection to the premillennial view. He states: “The certainty of the fulfillment of the covenant and the security of the believer under it, ultimately depend wholly on the obedience of Christ.”[5] *Ibid.*, p. 36. This is, of course, absolutely true, but it has no bearing on the argument here and is actually against the amillennial position. If it all hinged upon the obedience of Christ, and that obedience was absolutely certain, it would follow that the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant was also absolutely certain, which is exactly what premillennarians are trying to uphold and mean by its being unconditional. The main issue is whether the complete fulfillment of the covenant is certain, in spite of human failure.

Allis dips somewhat into the usual premillennial form of argument in still another point. He holds in effect that the covenant has already been fulfilled and that the promise of the multiplied seed was already realized by Solomon’s day (cf. Gen 13:16; 15:5 ; 22:17 ; 1 Kings 4:20; 1 Chron 27:23; 2 Chron 1:9; Heb 11:12). This, of course, all concede. It is in fact a stock premillennial argument that partial fulfillment of the covenant in a literal way demands literal fulfillment of the rest of it.

Allis goes right on to state, however, “As to the land, the dominion of David and of Solomon extended from the Euphrates to the River of Egypt (1 Kgs iv.21 ), which also reflects the terms of the covenant. Israel did come into possession of the land promised to the patriarchs. She possessed it, but not ‘for ever.’ Her possession of the land was forfeited by disobedience, both before and after the days of David and Solomon.”[6] *Ibid.*, p. 58. Allis admits, however, that the possession of the land did not really fulfill the covenant.

According to the Abrahamic Covenant, the land would be completely possessed, and would be permanently possessed as “an everlasting possession” (Gen 17:8). The fulfillment under Solomon breaks down under every requirement. As Allis very well knows, neither David nor Solomon “possessed” all the land for which the boundaries are given with precision in Genesis 15:18-21. At best much of this land was put under tribute, but was never possessed. Further as Allis admits, it was soon lost again, which in no wise fulfilled the promise of permanent or everlasting possession (Gen 17:8). Besides, Allis is quite oblivious to a fact that nullifies his entire argument here. That is that the prophets who lived after Solomon were still anticipating the future fulfillment of the promises of the everlasting possession of the land (cf. Amos 9:13-15) and reiterate in practically all the Minor Prophets the theme song that Israel is to be restored to the land, to be regathered there, and to continue under the blessing of God. While the promises relative to a large progeny may have been fulfilled in Solomon’s day, the promises relative to the land were not. were spiritual in character, at the same time it very literally fulfilled the prophecy which offered no physical promises to the Gentiles. There is no necessity to explain away the ordinary and plain meaning of the text to find the most accurate and complete fulfillment. The nations who blessed Israel have been blessed; the nations who cursed Israel have been cursed (Gen 12:3). Babylon, Assyria, and Egypt are clear Biblical examples, and in profane history it has been fulfilled ever since. The nations which have been notably friendly to Israel have been blessed, and the nations notably persecuting Israel have paid for it, witnessed in modern Russia, Germany, and Spain. As each detail of the provisions of the covenant is noted, fulfillment has followed the literal pattern.

All agree that certain provisions of the covenant are unfulfilled. The unfulfilled portions coincide with the future program for the world and for Israel as set forth by premillennarians. The promise of complete and everlasting possession of the land is to be fulfilled in the future millennial kingdom and will issue in possessions in the eternal new earth. Israel will continue as a nation, and will be dealt with as a nation by God. Israel’s distinct place and promises are apparently eternal. The day of full blessing, Israel’s regathering, her exaltation over the Gentiles, and her bliss under the righteous reign of the Son of David will provide the ultimate fulfillment which will complete the story of God’s faithfulness to His covenant. Because of the decisive importance of the issue of Israel’s future fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant, this will be considered next. Her continuance as a nation, her possession of the land, and her restoration are important themes of Scripture which fully confirm the premillennial concept of the Abrahamic Covenant.

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## Chapter 14

### Part 14: The Abrahamic Covenant and Premillennialism

(Continued from the January-March Number, 1952)

{Editor's note: Footnotes in the original printed edition were numbered 16-22, but in this electronic edition are numbered 1-7 respectively.}

#### Will Israel Continue as a Nation?

*The point at issue.* In previous discussion of the Abrahamic Covenant, it was shown that the term *seed of Abraham* had three distinct meanings as used in Scripture. It is used (1) of the natural seed of Abraham, limited in some contexts to the seed of Jacob or Israel; (2) it is used of the spiritual seed of Abraham within the natural seed—spiritual Israel; (3) it is used of those who are spiritual seed of Abraham but not natural descendants, i.e., Gentile believers. Premillennarians concede to amillenarians the existence of a spiritual seed of Abraham. The point at issue is that amillenarians insist that the Abrahamic Covenant is fulfilled only through the spiritual seed of Abraham and that therefore Israel racially and nationally has no covenant promises.

*The meaning of the term "Seed of Abraham."* The usual amillennial position is stated by Albertus Pieters in these words: "Whenever we meet with the argument that God made certain promises to the Jewish race, the above facts are pertinent. God never made any promise to any race at all, as a race. All His promises were to the continuing covenanted community, without regard to its racial constituents or to the personal ancestry of the individuals in it. Hence no proof that those whom the world now calls 'the Jews' are descended from Abraham, if it could be supplied (which it can not), would be of any avail to prove that they are entitled to the fulfillment of any divine promise whatsoever. Those promises were made to the covenanted group called 'The Seed of Abraham,' and to that community they must be fulfilled. What is needed is that one shall bring forward proof of his membership in that group." [1] Albertus Pieters, *The Seed of Abraham*, pp. 19-20. all families of the earth be blessed." Nothing should be plainer than that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob understood the term *seed* as referring to their physical lineage. While blessing is promised those outside the seed of Abraham if they believe as godly Abraham believed, the particular promises of a great posterity, of possession of the land, and being the channel of blessing to Gentiles is never given to any except the physical seed. Again it should be made clear that God is not undertaking to fulfill the promise to all the physical seed of Abraham, but through some of them, chosen as the line of the seed. While the line of the seed culminates in Christ, who fulfills much of the promise of blessing to the Gentiles, it is clear that all the twelve tribes not only Judah, were considered the seed of Abraham and in particular the seed of Israel.

While Pieters' presentation of the amillennial position accomplishes about all that could be asked for that viewpoint, it must be rejected as lacking any positive proof. The arguments, however cogently presented, do not prove the point at issue. The Scriptural use of the term *seed of Abraham* while it justifies the concept of a spiritual seed does not exclude the promises to the physical seed. The amillennial arguments beg the question by assuming what they are trying to prove. The fact is that Pieters and most amillenarians seem to avoid the real issues and in their discussion of the Abrahamic Covenant do not deal with that aspect that concerns the physical seed.

The concluding point of Pieters, that the Jews have no racial continuity, is an illustration of the extremes to which amillenarians are forced to go to sustain their position. Certainly the world today is bearing witness to the continuing

physical strain of Jewish blood, however contaminated by marriage with Gentiles. The Jews themselves acknowledge this physical lineage. Practically all Biblical scholars who are conservative acknowledge it whether premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial. Certainly the Scriptures continue the recognition of this people even after centuries of intermarriage with Gentiles. The Book of Revelation in its prophetic account of things future speaks of the twelve tribes being again identified by God. In modern history we have witnessed the creation of the political state of Israel in Palestine, the persecution of Jews as such in Europe, the continued teachings of orthodox Judaism as well as its reformed counterparts. Anyone in the face of such overwhelming evidence for recognition of the physical seed of Abraham in the world today who in effect denies them right and title to the name Israel is shutting his eyes to some very plain facts. One of the greatest of modern miracles has been the preservation of the identity of Israel as a race and nation, a fact which has been the stumbling stone for the amillennial denial of Israel's future. To deny that Israel has a bona fide existence today is to ignore that which is plain to everyone else.

*The term "Israel."* The millennial controversy over the meaning of the term *seed of Abraham* carries over into the term *Israel*. As a title given to Jacob, meaning *prince of God*, it has commonly been used to designate the physical descendants of Jacob. While amillennarians tend to deny that the seed of Abraham has any physical reference, as we have seen, they concede that the term *Israel* has some physical reference. The question at issue does not concern the Old Testament use of the term so much as it concerns the New Testament meaning of Israel.

Amillennarians characteristically do not agree among themselves on even the essentials of their theology, and their concept of Israel is a good illustration. The older and more familiar type of amillennarians, of which Calvin may be taken as a representative, holds that when Israel rejected Christ they lost their promises and that the New Testament church has become the inheritor of Israel's covenants. The church of the New Testament, they hold, is Israel. Oswald Allis, for instance, is a staunch defender of Calvin's viewpoint and goes so far as to label as extremists all who disagree with him on this point. He states: "Carrying to an almost unprecedented extreme that literalism which is characteristic of Millenarianism, they [the Brethren Movement] insisted that Israel must mean Israel, and that the kingdom promises in the Old Testament concern Israel and are to be fulfilled to Israel literally." [2] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 218. Allis is a little wild in this charge as will be made evident. The idea that Israel means Israel is not unprecedented, nor is it confined to the Brethren movement. It is held in its essentials by the postmillenarian Charles Hodge [3] Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 589. and by Professor William Hendriksen of Calvin Seminary, an avowed amillennarian. [4] William Hendriksen, *And So All Israel Shall Be Saved*, p. 33. Allis seems unaware that he himself is the one out of step. The whole tendency of modern theology both conservative and liberal is toward the position of distinguishing rather than merging Biblical Judaism and Christianity.

The newer allennial approach to the meaning of the term *Israel* is to regard it as always being basically a reference to those physically Israel. They may regard them like Hendriksen as spiritual Israel or elect Israel down through the ages, or like the postmillenarian Charles Hodge as Israelites who become Christians—certainly one of the Biblical usages, but there is no longer much zeal to make the church the inheritor of all Israel's promises.

There are a number of good reasons for this trend away from Calvin and his modern disciple Allis. Obviously the church does not fulfill in any literal way the great bulk of Israel's promises which had to do with repossession of the land, Israel's regathering, and a glorious kingdom on earth. It is much easier and more logical to seal off these promises as conditional and therefore no longer subject to fulfillment. This permits a more logical exposition of the passages without embarrassment by comparison with the history of the church. Further, Israel is promised curses as well as blessings under her covenants. To qualify for the blessings puts the church in a compromising position of being involved in Israel's curses also. Modern amillennialism prefers to stand on New Testament rather than Old Testament promises. and privilege constantly in his epistles. He declares that their peculiar promises include the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, the promises, the fathers, and the privilege of being the people of whom Christ should come (Rom 9:4-5). Now, it is obvious that Paul is referring to Israel *in unbelief* when he refers to those who have these privileges, for he declares: "I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: who are Israelites..." (Rom 9:3-4). He declares that they even in unbelief "are Israelites," and relates to them all the peculiar privileges of Israel. It is evident that the institution of the church did not rob Israel in the flesh of its peculiar place of privilege before God.

This declaration is given added weight by the fact that in Ephesians 2:12 Gentiles are expressly declared to have been excluded from the promises given to Israel: “That at that time ye [Gentiles] were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.” The passage goes on to state their privilege as Christians in the church. It is noteworthy that Paul does *not* say that the Gentiles came into these same Israelitish promises when they were converted; rather he pictures a work of God bringing Jew and Gentile into a new order entirely—“one new man” (Eph 2:15). It may be concluded without further argument that the distinction between natural Israel and Gentiles is continued after the institution of the church—Israel is still a genuine Israel, and the Gentiles continue to fulfill their part. While this fact of the Scripture is more or less admitted even by the amillennialist, the significance is not adequately realized. The continuance of Israel and Gentiles as such is a strong argument against either one being dispossessed of their own place. Israel is not reduced to the bankruptcy of the Gentiles—to become “strangers from the covenants of promises” (Eph 2:12), and the distinction between the two groups is maintained on the same sharp lines as before the church was instituted. the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fullness?” (Rom 11:12). In other words, if the blindness which has fallen upon Israel nationally during this present age was the occasion for great blessing for the Gentiles, the “fulness” of Israel will bring a richness of blessing which will be “much more.” Now, obviously, there can be no fullness of Israel if they have no future. Their fullness will come when the present condition of blindness is lifted.

He takes occasion to warn the Gentiles of their present privileges on the basis of this argument. In Romans 11:15 he refers again to the future blessing of Israel: “For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?” It is true that he speaks of Israel being broken off that the Gentiles might be grafted in (Rom 11:17-24), but he also speaks of the *future* ingrafting of Israel back into “their own olive tree” (Rom 11:24). This is contingent upon the “blindness” being lifted, and it is declared that the blindness will continue “until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in” (Rom 11:25). The use of the word *until* signifies not only that the period of Gentile blessing will end, but it also indicates that a future period of Israel’s ingrafting will follow. Samuel H. Wilkinson has brought this out: “If and when an ‘until’ sets a time-limit to any group of conditions, it makes the said group of conditions to be *temporary* not *everlasting*, to be *preliminary* not *final*. And the change, whatever it be, which is to occur when the time-limit is reached and passed, must surely refer to the same object as that which was submitted to the temporary conditions. With these two reasonable considerations in view, it will be found that all the time-limits described in the New Testament leave room for the full scope of Old Testament prophecy to become in due time realized.”[6] *The Israel Promises and Their Fulfillment* (London: John Bale, Sons & Danielsson, Ltd., 1936), p. 78.

The distinction between Israel outside of the church and the church itself, then, is a highly significant fact of Scripture. The Scriptures clearly state that Israel in unbelief is blinded, that this blinded condition is temporary not final, that the blindness will be lifted when the present period of Gentile blessing is concluded. The fulfillment of the covenants with Israel will follow, as Romans 11:26-32 indicates. Not only the fact of Israel’s continuance is revealed, but Israel’s present program and future blessings are specifically outlined in Romans eleven and other portions of Scripture which need not be discussed at this time.

*Spiritual Israel and Gentile Christians contrasted.* While the contrasts between Israel, Gentiles, and the church are severally important, the crux of the argument is the contrast between spiritual Israel, that is, those who have become Christians, and Gentile Christians. The twofold origin of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians is obvious to all. In the attempt to disfranchise Israel of her promises, however, some amillenarians claim that the church, composed of both Gentiles and Jews, takes Israel’s place of blessing completely. It is pointed out that there has always been an inner circle of Israelites who were the “true Israel” and that these were the genuine inheritors of the promises, not the nation as a whole. It is the purpose of this discussion to inquire into only one phase of the problem—Is the church ever identified with true or spiritual Israel, that is, are Gentile Christians ever included in the designation *Israel*? The problem of whether the church actually inherits Israel’s promises and realizes them is reserved for later treatment.

Two principal passages are the foundation for the discussion. In Romans 9-11 the problem comes up repeatedly. In Romans 9:6 it is revealed: “For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” Those who have opposed a future for Israel find in this passage a proof-text for their theory that only a portion of Israel, that is, those who are “spiritual,” inherit the promises, and

the rest are excluded from the promises. An examination of this passage, however, will reveal that the real contrast is not between those who inherit Abraham's promises and those who do not. It is rather that the promises to Abraham are classified as belonging either to Israel according to the flesh or Israel which enters into the spiritual promises by faith—which are given also to Gentile believers (Gal 3:6-9, 14). It is not, therefore, a contrast between those who are excluded and those who are included, but rather a contrast between those who inherit only the national promises and those who inherit the spiritual promises. The line of national promises is narrowed to Isaac and his seed (Rom 9:7), and the line of spiritual promises is narrowed to those who believe. In the present age, Israel as a nation is blinded, which blindness will be lifted. As individuals, Israelites who believe belong to the election of grace (Rom 11:5-10). Both Israelites in the flesh (unbelievers) and Israelites who believe are genuine Israelites. They are sharply distinguished as to present blessings. Unbelieving Israelites are lost and blinded, while believing Israelites come into all the present blessings of the church. The distinction is always on the ground of whether or not they believe in Christ, not on whether they are true Israelites.

The second principal passage is found in Galatians 6:15-16, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God." It has been alleged on the basis of this passage that the church as such is specifically called the "Israel of God." To this is opposed the fact that everywhere else in the Scriptures the term Israel is applied only to those who are the natural seed of Abraham and Isaac, never to Gentiles. If it can be sustained that in this passage the church is called *Israel*, it would, of course, be an argument for the identification of the church with Israel in the present age—though by no means conclusive, in the face of constant use of the term *Israel* in the Scriptures in reference to unbelieving Jews. An examination of Galatians 6:15-16, however, instead of proving any such identification is rather a specific instance where Jewish believers are distinguished from Gentile believers, and this by the very term *Israel of God*. Old Testament. It had always been limited to those who were genuine believers in the true God. Further, the "kingdom of God" is not to be identified with the millennial kingdom prophesied for Israel and the Gentile nations, though the millennial kingdom is an important manifestation and phase of the kingdom of God.

The declaration of Christ in this passage resolves itself into an affirmation that the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees would never be saved because of their rejection of the "son" of the "householder," and that others would take their place. Gaebelein suggests that the "nation" which will take their place will be other Israelites: "The nation to whom the Lord promises the Kingdom is not the Church. The Church is called the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, the Habitation of God by the Spirit, the Lamb's Wife, but never a nation. The nation is Israel still, but that believing remnant of the nation, living when the Lord comes." [7] A. C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Our Hope, 1910), II, 138.

The second major passage bearing on this problem is Romans 11:1-32. This chapter deals with the question whether God has cast off Israel. To this leading question Paul replies in positive terms, "God forbid." His argument may be summarized as a denial of this question. God has not cast away His people. There has always been a remnant in every age true to God. The unbelief of the nation Israel has never caused God to cast off His people as a whole (Rom 11:3-4). There has always been a continuing program for Israel as witnessed in the present election of grace. Some Jews are being saved. While unbelieving Jews are blinded now, their present blindness will be lifted and replaced by sight and faith. When this glad day comes "all Israel shall be saved" (Rom 11:26), meaning a group or national deliverance in contrast to the individual salvation offered now. At that time God's covenants with Israel will be fulfilled, for the gifts and calling of God are without repentance, sure and irrevocable. The whole tenor of the chapter is against either the idea that Israel has lost all future hope of fulfillment of their promises through cancellation or that the church has received these promises and Israel is disinherited.

On the basis of this brief study of terminology, the evidence has been examined and found to produce nothing indicating that the term *Israel* is ever used of Gentiles. Rather it is used of the godly remnant in all ages, Christian Jews, and the future national entity anticipated through the Scriptures. None of these usages support the amillennial contention that Israel has no national future. With this as a foundation, Israel's precise promises relative to the land, her regathering and repossession of it, may be considered.

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 15

### Part 15: The Abrahamic Covenant and Premillennialism

#### Will Israel Possess the Promised Land?

One of the important provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant is the promise of possession of the land. From Abraham's point of view, this was undoubtedly one of its main features. In the original promise, he was told, "Get thee out...unto a land that I will shew thee" (Gen 12:1). This anticipation of possessing the land is given more content in Genesis 13:15, where Abraham is promised, "For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever." This promise of the land is subsequently enlarged and given specific boundaries, and the land is promised as an everlasting possession.

All interpreters of the Abrahamic Covenant are faced with the question of the interpretation and fulfillment of these promises. In general, amillenarians tend either to make these promises conditional, and therefore not requiring fulfillment, or to spiritualize them and point to past possessions of the land as fulfilling the promise. Premillenarians consider the promises as given unconditionally as far as ultimate fulfillment is concerned and therefore hold that Israel has a bona fide ground for future possession of the land, particularly in the millennial kingdom period. For practical purposes the problem resolves into the question of whether Israel will ever possess all the promised land.

It has been previously shown that the Abrahamic Covenant is basically unconditional, though the present enjoyment of it by an individual or a nation may have certain conditions. It has also been shown that Israel shall continue as a nation forever. If these two conclusions be sustained, it follows that Israel as such will possess the land. It also is true that all the evidence pointing to ultimate possession of the land confirms and supports the idea that the covenant is unconditional and that Israel will continue as a nation forever.

*The character of the promise of the land.* The promise of possession of the land by the seed of Abraham is a prominent feature of the covenant, and the way the promise is given enhances its significance. The promise as given emphasizes that (1) it is gracious in its principle; (2) the land is an inheritance of the seed; (3) its title is given forever; (4) the land is to be possessed forever; (5) the land promised includes specific territory defined by boundaries. It is difficult to imagine how God could have made it clearer that the covenant was sure of its literal fulfillment.

The promise is gracious in its principle. Unlike the Mosaic Covenant, which conditions the promises of blessing upon obedience, the Abrahamic Covenant simply pronounces God's intention to give the land to Abraham and his seed forever. Its character as an inheritance of the seed is repeated in the subsequent enlargement of the promise and is linked to the physical lineage. The emphasis upon its unending application as seen in the words "for ever" (Gen 13:15), "everlasting covenant" (Gen 17:7), and "everlasting possession" (Gen 17:8) carries with it the necessity of complete and unconditional fulfillment. The extent of the possession of the land as defined in Genesis 15:18-21, including the great area from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates, can hardly be spiritualized without abandoning any pretense of sensible exegesis. If this covenant means what it appears to mean, the only proper interpretation is that given by the premillenarians.

*The dispersions of Israel.* Like the Abrahamic Covenant as a whole, the promise of the land is never conditioned upon human obedience. As has been shown, the pronouncements are unequivocal in character. God is revealing what He will fulfill. All agree, however, that prior to the ultimate fulfillment of the promise, possession and enjoyment of the land by any generation of Israelites is conditioned upon certain requirements. These are set forth in both the Mosaic Covenant and the

Palestinian Covenant (cf. Deut 28:1-30:10). Israel is promised rich blessings in the land for obedience, but is promised curses for disobedience. Among the curses are plagues and disasters if they are in the land, and dispersion to various places out of the land. As early as Genesis 15:13, the dispersions of Israel are anticipated.

In general, three dispersions of Israel are prophesied in the Scripture. The first of these was the sojourn in Egypt when Jacob and his family followed Joseph in leaving the land of promise. This is foretold in Genesis 15:13, and it is promised that they would return to the land with great substance (Gen 15:14-16). The second dispersion was that of the captivities of Assyria and Babylon, when first the ten tribes and then the remaining tribes were in large measure removed from the promised land because of sin. This dispersion is a large theme of both the major and minor prophets and was prophesied by Moses (Deut 28:62-65; 30:1-3; Jer 25:11). There are frequent promises of restoration from this dispersion (Dan 9:2; Jer 29:10-14). Historically Israel returned to the land under Zerubbabel and Ezra. The final dispersion took place in 70 A.D. at the destruction of Jerusalem, and Israel only in recent years has taken any important steps to return to the land.

One of the phenomena of the modern world is the creation of the state of Israel and the large movement of Jews from all over the world back to their ancient land. As the three dispersions are history along with the two historic returns, the theological question hangs on the issue of whether Israel is to be regathered for the third time and brought back to possess the land of promise. History has shown that the previous returns of Israel, while involving human contingencies, nevertheless were carried out on schedule according to the prophetic Word. The return from Egypt, while not without chronological difficulties, can be reconciled to the prophetic pattern laid out in Genesis. The return of Israel from the second dispersion is clearly linked with the chronology of the seventy weeks of the captivity, and difficulties are merely with the details and questions of actual dates. The third dispersion is nowhere dated in the Word of God but like the previous returns is certain as to its ultimate fulfillment.

From a study of the dispersions of Israel and the two regatherings which have already been fulfilled it can be seen that as a general principle divine certainty is given both the dispersions and the regatherings. Premillenarians do not deny that there are human contingencies involved. Obviously the dispersions themselves depended upon Israel's disobedience and the dispersions were a form of judgment from God. In this sense they were conditional but nevertheless certain. The regatherings are also hinged upon Israel turning back to God in a measure. It is inherent in the pronouncements of Moses that the return to the land would follow a return to God (cf. Deut 30:1-5). The point is that not only the dispersions were predicted definitely before human failure appeared, but the regatherings of Israel were clearly predicted before Israel returned to God spiritually. In other words, the human contingencies are fully recognized, but the certainty of the prophetic plan is nevertheless affirmed. It is in this sense that the promise of ultimate fulfillment is unconditional. The doctrine of the third regathering of Israel and their possession of the land depends, then, on the question whether the promises of regathering and possession of the land are already fulfilled by Israel's history or whether the Scriptures require a future fulfillment—a third regathering followed by possession of the land.

*Have historic possessions of the land fulfilled the Scriptures?* The amillenarian position on Israel's possession of the land is that the promise has already been fulfilled. George L. Murray[1] George L. Murray, *Millennial Studies* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1948), p. 27. cites 1 Kings 4:21, 24 as evidence that the promise was fulfilled in Solomon's day, "And Solomon reigned over all kingdoms from the river unto the land of the Philistines, and unto the border of Egypt: they brought presents, and served Solomon all the days of his life.... For he had dominion over all the region on this side of the river; and he had peace on all sides round about him." Murray[2] *Ibid.*, p. 28. further cites Joshua 21:43, 45 to the same point, and concludes with a reference to Nehemiah 9:7-8 which to him is conclusive. He states, "Whatever political movements we may witness now or in the future by way of a restoration of Hebrew economy in the land of Palestine, these will not come by way of fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham of possession of the land, for we have conclusive evidence that these promises have been fulfilled." [3] *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30. Oswald Allis, takes essentially the same position quoting only the Solomon reference. [4] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 58.

The amillenarian position is often distinguished for its blindness to facts which would upset its own position. The present instance is a good illustration. If the promises regarding the land were fulfilled in Joshua's time or in Solomon's, why do the Scriptures which were written later still appeal to the hope of future possession of the land? Practically every one of the major and minor prophets mention in some form the hope of future possession of the land. All of them were written after

Solomon's day. This is an obvious rebuttal to the amillennial position and points to the amillennial failure to face the real issues of the millennial debate with a view to all the evidence.

The case of Nehemiah is an illustration of faulty logic. In the confession of the priests, tribute is given to God as one who had been faithful in giving to Israel the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites, and the Girgashites. On the basis of the statement, "and hast performed thy words; for thou art righteous," Murray contends that the Abrahamic promise has been completely fulfilled.

A careful reading of all these related passages of Scripture will show that they do not prove what is claimed of them. The original promises of the land involved (1) possession of the land, (2) permanent possession, (3) and occupying the land. Even in Solomon's day at the height of his kingdom the land was not all possessed. At best it was placed under tribute as the very passage cited by the amillenarians indicates (1 Kings 4:21). It is most significant that Murray in his quotation of this Scripture omits the part of the verse referring to this tribute—presents and service which show there was no real possession of the land. Certainly all must agree that possession was not permanent. Further at no time was all the land actually occupied by Israel.

The priests in the Nehemiah reference do not claim complete fulfillment. They merely state that God had given the land to them—i.e., had done His part. The past occupancy of the land was a partial fulfillment but not a complete fulfillment of the promise. Certainly in the light of the Nehemiah context, it is reaching an unwarranted conclusion to press the words of Nehemiah, "and hast performed thy words; for thou art righteous," to mean that all the promises had already been fulfilled relating to the land of Palestine. It refers rather to the general faithfulness of God revealed in the following context (Neh 9:9-38) to include not only acts of mercy but all the righteous judgments of God for the sins of Israel. To follow Murray in his interpretation of Nehemiah would involve the spiritualization of all the prophecies about the land subsequent to Solomon as well as those before Solomon. The real issue remains whether the Scriptures after Solomon continue to anticipate a future and glorious regathering of Israel and occupancy of the promised land.

*The Scriptural testimony concerning Israel's final regathering.* The abundant testimony of Scripture on the subject of Israel's regathering provides material for a book on this subject alone. It is the dominant strain of both the major and minor prophets. Isaiah after dealing with the character of the kingdom reign of Christ on earth (Isa 11:1-11), goes on, "And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord will set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people, that shall remain, from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea" (Isa 11:11-12). The same theme is repeated in other words in many other passages in Isaiah (14:1-3 ; 27:12-13 ; 43:1-8 ; 49:8-16 ; 66:20-22 ). The promise of regathering is not only reiterated again and again but it is linked to the continuance of Israel as a nation forever: "For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith Jehovah, so shall your seed and your name remain" (Isa 66:20).

The prophet Jeremiah, living in the days of Israel's apostasy, writes graphically, "Therefore, behold, the days come, saith Jehovah, that it shall no more be said, As Jehovah liveth, that brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; but, As Jehovah liveth, that brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north, and from all the countries whither he had driven them. And I will bring them again into their land that I gave unto their fathers. Behold, I will send for many fishers, saith Jehovah, and they shall fish them up; and afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain, and from every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks" (Jer 16:14-16). This certainly has had no fulfillment to the present hour, but it foreshadows the complete regathering in connection with the millennial kingdom. The theme of regathering is reiterated in connection with the coming of the righteous branch of David to reign over the earth (Jer 23:3-8).

Again in Jeremiah 30:10-11, the prophet speaks: "Therefore fear thou not, O Jacob my servant, saith Jehovah; neither be dismayed, O Israel: for, lo, I will save thee from afar, and thy seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall return, and shall be quiet and at ease, and none shall make him afraid. For I am with thee, saith Jehovah, to save thee...." Most of the thirty-first chapter of Jeremiah is devoted to this theme. Jehovah declares, "Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the uttermost parts of the earth" (Jer 31:8). The theme of regathering is linked in this chapter with the new covenant with the house of Israel (Jer 31:31-34) and the solemn pledge that Israel shall continue as a nation as

long as the sun, moon, and stars (Jer 31:35-37).

The prophet Ezekiel adds his testimony (11:17-21 ; 20:33-38 ; 34:11-16 ; 39:25-29 ). Included in his testimony is the purging judgment of Israel which follows their regathering (20:33-38 ) and the pledge that God will leave not a single Israelite in the lands of the Gentiles after the regathering (Ezek 39:28). There has never been any fulfillment of these prophecies in the regatherings after the captivities when most of the Israelites were left behind. If these Scriptures are to have any reasonable fulfillment it demands a future regathering of Israel and the fulfillment of all the related promises.

The testimony of the Minor Prophets to the regathering of Israel is often repeated. It is sustained by many references which imply the regathering, such as the pictures of Israel in the land, or sometimes general promises of restoration. A study of these passages will fully sustain the doctrine of Israel's regathering (Hos 1:10-11; Joel 3:17-21; Amos 9:11-15; Micah 4:4-7; Zeph 3:14-20; Zech 8:4-8). Of note is the promise of Amos, "And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be plucked up out of their land which I have given them, saith Jehovah thy God" (Amos 9:15). The regathering and possession of the land here prophesied is the final regathering attended by the promise that Israel will no more be dispersed. This could apply only to a future regathering as the past regatherings all ended in further dispersion.

The united testimony of the prophets is all to the same point, that Israel will yet be regathered from the nations, of the world and reassembled in Palestine. The beginnings of this final regathering are already apparent in contemporary history with over one million Jews, or approximately one in ten of all the Jewish population of the world, now living in Palestine. Scriptures make clear that the regathering will continue until consummated after the second advent of Christ. The promises of regathering linked as they are in Scripture to the original promise of the land as an everlasting possession of Israel, coupled with the fact that no possession of the land in history has approached a complete fulfillment of these Scriptural promises, make it clear that Israel has a future, and in that future will actually possess all the land promised Abraham's seed as long as this present earth continues.

Dallas, Texas

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"The future condition of the Jews is a subject which has received from various sources no small attention. The subject is worthy of attention. It is worthy of attention for its own sake. Every branch of truth and every department of the divine operations has in it something to repay investigation. The connection of this subject with other themes imparts to it a still higher interest. The right understanding of it will lead to some views of essential importance in regard to the general character of the religion of the Bible, besides which some lessons of practical duty will grow out of it. The Jews have been a people greatly distinguished. Their origin was remarkable—Abraham, the father of the faithful and the friend of God. For two thousand years they constituted God's visible congregation, while all the other peoples of the world were left without the impressive merciful visitations with which they were favored. Through this dark period they were the depositories of the oracles and the ordinances of the true religion, for the world's benefit in subsequent time. And through them came at length the world's Deliverer, 'the light and life of men.' To these things the Apostle alludes...(Rom 3:1-2; 9:4-5 ). The past in respect to them is full of wonders" (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, May, 1847).

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 16

### Part 16: The Abrahamic Covenant and Premillennialism

(Continued from the July-September Number, 1952)

#### Will Israel Be Restored as a Nation?

Most of the prophets of the Old Testament with enraptured gaze contemplated the glory of a millennial kingdom in which Israel would be restored and be head of all nations. In the darkest hours of Israel's apostasy and sin, in the very hour of her captivity and disgrace, the prophets uttered their message of hope. Jeremiah's word may be taken as typical: "Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee. Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned with tabrets, and shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry. Thou shalt yet plant vines upon the mountains of Samaria: the planters shall plant, and shall eat them as common things.... Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the coasts of the earth, and with them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her that travaileth with child together: a great company shall return thither. They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble: for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.... And it shall come to pass, that like as I have watched over them, to pluck up, and to break down, and to throw down, and to destroy, and to afflict; so will I watch over them, to build, and to plant, saith the LORD.... Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.... But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer 31:3-5, 8-9, 28, 31, 33-34).

The Abrahamic Covenant required that Israel continue as a nation forever in order to fulfill the "everlasting covenant" (Gen 17:7) and in order to have the land as "an everlasting possession" (Gen 17:8). All the facts discussed previously, to the point that Israel continues as a nation forever, possesses the land forever, is not disinherited, is not supplanted by the church, and that Israel's basic covenants are dependent upon God's faithfulness alone for fulfillment, combine to require Israel's restoration after these centuries of dispersion and chastening. The conclusion that Israel has a future restoration is based upon these facts along with the voluminous testimony of the prophets concerning Israel's coming golden age.

The present discussion must confine itself to the simple question of the fact of Israel's restoration. This fact has been doubted in proportion as expositors have questioned the Scriptures upon which Israel's restoration is based. The opposition has come from two principal sources: those who deny the prophetic portions of the Word of God on the basis of rejection of their inspiration and authority, and those who deny the literal interpretation of these prophecies while accepting their authority and inspiration.

Within the ranks of those who accept inspiration the restoration of Israel is recognized in exact proportion to the degree of literal interpretation allowed. Amillenarians who follow the Augustinian pattern usually spiritualize the restoration of Israel

as meaning merely the growth and progress of the church. Into this pattern fall Oswald Allis, B. B. Warfield, and Louis Berkhof. Some contemporary amillenarians such as William Hendriksen and some postmillenarians such as Charles Hodge interpret the promises of Israel's restoration as a picture of the revival of Israel within the church, i.e., the conversion of the Jews to Christianity in large numbers. This tends toward a more literal interpretation as it refers the promises to Israel rather than the church as a whole. Any attempt to interpret the promises given to Israel literally, however, points to a future restoration coincident to the establishment of the millennial kingdom upon the earth at the second advent of Jesus Christ. This future restoration of Israel is in harmony with and supported by the great body of revelation concerning Israel much of which has already been discussed. By way of summary certain leading facts may be mentioned.

Israel's continuance as a nation. The provision of the Abrahamic Covenant for an everlasting covenant relation and the promises of God for Israel's continuance as a nation to inherit these covenant promises combine to assure Israel's continuance as a nation. The thought of Israel ceasing "from being a nation" is as unthinkable to the prophet Jeremiah as the revocation of ordinances of the sun, moon, and stars and as impossible as it is to measure the heavens or search out the foundations of the earth (cf. Jer 31:35-37). The historic fact is that Israel has continued as a recognizable entity in the world in spite of centuries of dispersion and corruption of the physical seed. The twentieth century has witnessed the miracle of this ancient people establishing after the lapse of nineteen hundred years a political state bearing its name and embodying at least a portion of their ancient geographical possessions. This is all the more remarkable because those who are accomplishing this phenomenon are not for the most part believers in the Scriptures and do not recognize the prophetic significance of what they are doing.

Israel's regathering after dispersion. The foundation of the state of Israel in recent years has been a part of the predicted regathering of scattered Israel back to their ancient land. Previous discussion has pointed out the three predicted dispersions of Israel as already having been fulfilled along with two predicted regatherings. The present movement of Jews back to Palestine is apparently the first stage of the third regathering. That over one million Jews are already in Palestine in a movement that parallels in many ways the Exodus from Egypt is tangible evidence which cannot be ignored reasonably. The significance of the re-gathering is that it justifies the literal interpretation of prophecy which anticipated just such a movement. If the regathering is to be taken literally, as present history would indicate, it would naturally follow that the predicted golden age is ahead following the second advent of Christ. Just as the second gathering was the prelude for the first advent of Christ, so the third regathering is the prelude for the second advent.

Israel's possession of the promised land. An integral part of the original Abrahamic Covenant was the promise of everlasting possession of the land. Specific boundaries given to Abraham (Gen 15:18-21) indicate the extent of the promise. Previous discussion of this has shown that these promises have never been fulfilled, that they are unconditionally promised to Israel, that delays, dispersions, and Israel's failures do not abrogate the promises. The present partial possession of the land is a token. The complete possession awaits the coming of Israel's Redeemer. The possession of the land anticipates also Israel's restoration. One is antecedent to the other. The cumulative force of all the Abrahamic promises strengthened and enlarged by extensive prophetic portions of Scripture focuses upon the conclusion that Israel is to be restored as a nation.

The restoration of Israel in the New Testament. The teaching of Christ and the expectation of the apostles anticipated the fulfillment of the prophecies relative to Israel's kingdom. The bulk and content of the coming kingdom is given so largely in the Old Testament that the New Testament confines itself for the most part to confirmation. As shown in previous discussion, Christ when questioned about the coming kingdom never denied and rather confirmed that it remained the sure expectation of the people of Israel. Mary the mother of our Lord was assured that her son would sit upon the throne of David and reign over the house of Jacob forever (Luke 1:32-33). The ambitious mother of James and John is denied her petition that her sons sit on either side of Christ in the kingdom, not on the ground that her hope of the earthly kingdom was an error, but on the ground that this honor was only for those whom the Father chose (Matt 20:19-23). The apostles had been previously assured that they would sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes in the day of restoration (Matt 19:28), and would eat at His table (Luke 22:30). When on the day of ascension they asked the Christ, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6), they were not rebuked for doctrinal error but informed merely that the "times or the seasons" were in the hands of the Father. In other words, the teaching of Christ never refutes the common expectation of the Jews and the apostles for literal fulfillment of the promises of an earthly kingdom for Israel, but rather confirms it.

The classic passage in the New Testament on the issue of Israel's restoration is Romans 11, which has already been referred to repeatedly. The general teaching of Romans 11 is that Israel is to be restored. Paul asks the question, "Hath God cast away his people?" In answer to that question, Paul states categorically, "No"—"God forbid." The arguments are then piled up in confirmation of this answer. God has never cast away His people. In the time of apostasy prior to the captivities, Elijah is assured that there was a godly remnant of 7,000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal (Rom 11:2-4). During the lifetime of Paul himself there was "a remnant according to the election of grace" (Rom 11:5), i.e., Jewish Christian believers. The fact that the nation Israel as a whole is unconverted and blinded is plainly faced (Rom 11:6-10). The purpose of allowing Israel's failure is revealed as an act of mercy to the Gentiles: "I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy" (Rom 11:11).

From the very fact of the fall of Israel resulting in great Gentile blessing, the argument continues that Israel is destined for a glorious future: "Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness?" (Rom 11:12). Israel's time of fullness is still ahead. Using the figure of an olive tree as the fountain of blessing, Israel is pictured as being cut off the olive tree and the Gentiles are grafted in. But, Paul argues, if Gentiles who are like branches from a wild olive tree can be grafted into a good tree, how much more can Israel who is of the good tree naturally be grafted back in? Gentiles are warned that if they continue not in faith they too shall be cut off. It is clear that he is not talking about individual Gentiles or individual Israelites, but rather to each entity as a group. Today is the time of Gentile opportunity while the Israel promises are suspended. The day is coming when the present time of Gentile blessing or fullness will come in and then Israel's hour of blessing will follow.

The subject of Israel's blindness as now imposed and as scheduled for removal is to a large extent the key to the passage. It is not strange that a number of interpretations should be given to Romans 11:25, "For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." According to Origen, the father of allegorical interpretation, "all Israel" means simply "all believers." The Reformers like Origen attempted to eliminate Israel from the passage entirely. Calvin changed the "until" to "that"—a deliberate interpretation rather than a translation—so that the passage read, "Blindness in part is happened to Israel that the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." [1] John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, in loc. Luther labeled the Jews as the devil's children impossible to convert. [2] Cf. Charles Hodge, *Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 584-85. Origen, Calvin, and Luther unite in opposition to considering Israel as meaning Israel. On the other hand, Charles Hodge interpreted Romans 11:25 as predicting "a great and general conversion of the Jewish people, which should take place when the fulness of the Gentiles had been brought in, and that then, and not till then, those prophecies should be fully accomplished which speak of the salvation of Israel." [3] *Ibid.*, p. 584. Charles Hodge goes on to prove by eight formal arguments that his position is that of the historic church and that the Reformers are the exception rather than the rule in their interpretation.

Premillennialism holds that Israel as used in this passage refers to the nation Israel and that what is predicted here is their release from the blindness or obtuseness of spiritual discernment which fell on them as a judgment of unbelief. Robertson cites Hippocrates as using the term in a medical sense and concludes that it means "obtuseness of intellectual discernment, mental dullness." [4] A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, IV, 398. This judgment had fallen upon Israel. While Israel in the Old Testament had been guilty of unbelief in the prophetic Word, in the New Testament they had been guilty of unbelief in the fulfillment in Christ. For this reason it is designated a "mystery" doctrine not revealed prior to the New Testament but now revealed. Robertson defines mystery, "the revealed will of God now made known to all." [5] *Ibid.*, IV, 397. The mystery consisted in the special judicial blindness which had befallen Israel over and above any natural blindness common to Israel or Gentiles in the past.

The blindness which befell Israel is scheduled for removal when "the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." This expression has been variously defined by commentators. According to the context the fall of Israel is a parallel to the fullness of the Gentiles, and the end of the fullness of the Gentiles would parallel the restoration of Israel. The "until" marks, then, the terminus of Gentile blessing, and the beginning of Israel's restoration. This in turn can be identified as the time of the Lord's coming for the church and the end of the age of grace.

Subsequent to the lifting of Israel's blindness, it is predicted, "And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob" (Rom 11:26). Here is a specific declaration that Israel will be restored. This interpretation hangs upon the interpretation of the term "all Israel," upon the character of the salvation or deliverance of Israel, and upon the question of the time of the deliverance.

The term Israel as it is used here is defined by the context as a genuine reference to the Jewish people. It is used in contrast to Gentiles throughout the preceding context. Except for Origen, and Calvin and those who completely spiritualize the term, this is generally accepted. Previous discussion has shown that the word Israel is never used in reference to Gentiles in the Bible. Not only premillenarians but many postmillenarians and amillenarians also accept Israel as meaning the Jewish people, not the church as such.[6] Cf. A. T. Robertson, *op. cit.*, IV, 398; Charles Hodge, *op. cit.*, p. 589; William Hendriksen, *And So All Israel Shall Be Saved*, p. 33. Charles Hodge states plainly, "Israel, here, from the context, must mean the Jewish people, and all Israel, the whole nation. The Jews, as a people, are now rejected; as a people, they are to be restored. As their rejection, although national, did not include the rejection of every individual; so their restoration, although in like manner national, need not be assumed to include the salvation of every individual Jew. Pas Israel is not therefore to be here understood to mean, all the true people of God, as Augustine, Calvin, and many others explain it; nor all the elect Jews, i.e., all that part of the nation which constitute 'the remnant according to the election of grace'; but the whole nation, as a nation." [7] Charles Hodge, *op. cit.*, p. 589. The term "all Israel" may be taken, then, as a reference to the people as a whole.

The nature of the salvation of Israel indicated here is described by a citation of Old Testament prophecy, "There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: for this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins" (Rom 11:26-27). The quotation is from Isaiah 59:20-21 and a comparison will show at once the identity of the two passages and at the same time show the quotation is only in part and with variations. Three things are singled out in the Romans quotation: (1) the Redeemer or Deliverer shall come out of Zion. (2) He shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob. (3) The deliverance shall be a fulfillment of the covenant with Israel including taking away their sins.

The phrase "out of Zion" in Romans 11:26 has been seized upon because the Isaiah passage reads, "to Zion." The LXX has it "for Zion." Paul uses neither the Hebrew nor the LXX. Where did Paul get this phrase? The answer is that Paul is not attempting direct quotation. The reference to turning away ungodliness is not in the Isaiah passage either. Paul is appealing rather to the general doctrine. The Scriptures speak of Christ as both coming to Zion and coming from Zion (cf. Ps 14:7; 20:2; 53:6; 110:2; 128:5; 134:3; 135:21; Isa 2:3; Joel 3:16; Amos 1:2). Certainly Paul is justified in his declaration that what he quoted "was written." Further, the change in wording gives no comfort to the amillenarian though Allis tries to make it imply that only a heavenly Zion is in view.[8] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 305. Even if Allis were right, the action is subsequent to the second advent and deals with Israel on earth, not in heaven. It should be obvious, however, that Christ in His second advent comes both to Zion and from Zion. He comes to Zion in His second advent, and goes forth from Zion to bring deliverance to Israel.

Zion, as it is used in the Scripture, has reference to Jerusalem and is often used in this sense as synonymous. Its use in the Old Testament as in the New is literal in every instance. Amillenarians find it necessary to spiritualize the term in Hebrews 12:22 and Revelation 14:1 in order to avoid premillennial ideas, but if the doctrine of premillennialism be established on other grounds, these passages like all others yield to an ordinary literal usage.

The Deliverer "shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob" and "take away their sins." Here again is an event not a process, specified as subsequent to the second advent. According to the Scripture, Israel will also be delivered in that day from her persecutors, regathered from all over the earth and brought back to her ancient land, and there blessed spiritually and materially. All these events are not mentioned here. To conclude as Allis does that items not mentioned are therefore not included is a precarious argument from silence.[9] *Loc. cit.* The purpose of Romans 11 is not to summarize all the future of Israel but to speak to the point of whether Israel is "cast away." The evidence is complete and decisive: Israel has a future, a glorious one, which will be fulfilled subsequent to the return of her Deliverer.

The restoration of Israel is the capstone of the grand structure of doctrine relating to the Abrahamic Covenant. In bringing to

a close consideration of this covenant as it pertains to premillennialism, attention should be directed again to the strategic importance of this revelation to Scriptural truth. It has been seen that the covenant included provisions not only to Abraham but to Abraham's physical seed, Israel, and to Abraham's spiritual seed, i.e., all who follow the faith of Abraham whether Jew or Gentile in this age. It has been shown that Abraham interpreted the covenant literally as pertaining primarily to his physical seed. The unconditional character of the covenant has been demonstrated—a covenant resting upon God's promise and faithfulness alone. The partial fulfillment recorded to the present has confirmed the intent of God to give literal fulfillment to the promises. It has been shown that Israel's promise of perpetual possession of the land is an inevitable part and conclusion of the general promises given Abraham and confirmed to his seed. Israel's continuance as a nation, implied in these promises, has been sustained by the continued confirmation of both Testaments. It was shown that the New Testament church in no wise fulfills these promises given to Israel. Finally, Israel's restoration as the natural outcome of these promises has been presented as the express teaching of the entire Bible. If these conclusions reached after careful examination of the Scriptural revelation are sound and reasonable, it follows that premillennialism is the only satisfactory system of doctrine that harmonizes with the Abrahamic Covenant.

These conclusions are further strengthened and supported by the other Biblical covenants given to David and the New Covenant given to Israel. Next in order of consideration will be the promises given to David concerning his seed, throne, and kingdom.

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 17

### Part 17: The Kingdom Promises to David

Next in importance to the Abrahamic covenant in the Old Testament doctrine of premillennialism stands the Davidic covenant—the promises of God to David that his seed, throne, and kingdom would endure forever. This covenant has been obscured and ignored by most amillenarians and again and again statements are made that premillennialism rests solely upon the interpretation of Revelation 20. Louis Berkhof in his discussion of “the premillennial theory” states, “The only Scriptural basis for this theory is Rev 20:1-6, after an Old Testament content has been poured into it.”[1] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 715. In other words it is expressly denied that the Old Testament or the New provides any teaching at all on an earthly millennial kingdom. One of the reasons for such an unwarranted conclusion is the neglect of the Biblical covenants of the Old Testament of which the Davidic is prominent. The principle of spiritualization of all prophecies, which would teach premillennialism, is carried through with precision by the amillenarians with the result that by a process of changing the meaning of the promises they are robbed of their content. A study of amillenarian interpretation of the Davidic covenant well illustrates this method. Accepting as literal those prophecies which do not affect the premillennial argument and spiritualizing all others, they are able with straight face to declare that the Old Testament does not teach a millennial kingdom on earth. On the contrary, premillennarians believe these promises were intended to be interpreted literally as most certainly David understood them and as the Jews living in the time of Christ anticipated. A study of this covenant will afford another strong confirmation of premillennial doctrine.[2] For a previous presentation of this same truth see *Bibliotheca Sacra*, “The Fulfilment of the Davidic Covenant,” April-June 1945, pp. 153-66 by the same author. Portions of this material are reproduced in this article. The classic work on this theme is George N. H. Peters’ *The Theocratic Kingdom*, recently republished by Kregel Publications in three volumes of over 2,000 pages.

### Analysis of the Promise to David

David had the godly ambition to build a temple to Jehovah. The incongruity of allowing the ark of God to remain in a temporary tentlike tabernacle while he himself lived in the luxury of a house of cedar seemed to call for the erection of a suitable permanent building to be the center of worship. To Nathan, the prophet, was revealed that God intended David to build something more enduring than any material edifice. David’s “house” was to be his posterity and through them his throne and his kingdom were to continue forever. The main features of the covenant are included in the following passage: “When thy days are fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, that shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son: if he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men; but my lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee. And thy house and thy kingdom shall be made sure for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever” (2 Sam 7:12-16, A.S.V.).

The provisions of the Davidic covenant include, then, the following items: (1) David is to have a child, yet to be born, who shall succeed him and establish his kingdom. (2) This son (Solomon) shall build the temple instead of David. (3) The throne of his kingdom shall be established forever. (4) The throne will not be taken away from him (Solomon) even though his sins justify chastisement. (5) David’s house, throne, and kingdom shall be established forever.

To Solomon, then, was promised a throne which would be established forever. To David was promised a posterity, a throne, and a kingdom to be established forever. The promise is clear that the throne passed on through Solomon to David’s

posterity was never to be abolished. It is not clear whether the posterity of David should be through the line of Solomon. It will be shown that this fine point in the prophecy was occasioned by the cutting off of the posterity of Solomon as far as the throne is concerned.

What do the major terms of the covenant mean? By David's "house" it can hardly be doubted that reference is made to David's posterity, his physical descendants. It is assured that they will never be slain *in toto*, nor displaced by another family entirely. The line of David will always be the royal line. By the term "throne" it is clear that no reference is made to a material throne, but rather to the dignity and power which was sovereign and supreme in David as king. The right to rule always belonged to David's seed. By the term "kingdom" there is reference to David's political kingdom over Israel. By the expression "for ever" it is signified that the Davidic authority and Davidic kingdom or rule over Israel shall never be taken from David's posterity. The right to rule will never be transferred to another family, and its arrangement is designed for eternal perpetuity. Whatever its changing form, temporary interruptions, or chastisements, the line of David will always have the right to rule over Israel and will, in fact, exercise this privilege. This then, in brief, is the covenant of God with David.

## Old Testament Confirmation

It should be clear to anyone who interprets the Old Testament prophecies literally that the entire theme of Messianic prophecy confirms the Davidic promises. The great kingdom promises of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel combine with the Minor Prophets in reiterating the theme of the coming Immanuel and His kingdom upon the earth. Isaiah wrote of this, "Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever" (Isa 9:7). Again Isaiah writes, "With righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked" (Isa 11:4). Such passages can be multiplied.

Not only are there many general kingdom promises but there is also specific confirmation of the Davidic covenant. Psalm 89 reiterates the content and makes the covenant immutable and sure even though Israel sins: "I have made a covenant with my chosen. I have sworn unto David my servant, Thy seed will I establish for ever, and build up thy throne to all generations. Selah.... My mercy will I keep for him for evermore, and my covenant shall stand fast with him. His seed also will I make to endure for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven. If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; if they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips. Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not lie unto David. His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven. Selah."

## Fulfillment at the First Advent of Christ

While modern liberalism does not concern itself with the fulfillment of the promises to David, conservative scholars whether amillennial or premillennial are agreed at least that Jesus Christ is the one who fulfills the Davidic covenant. This is the import of the testimony of the angel to 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 Most High: 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" (Luke 1:31-33). The promises to David are therefore transferred to Jesus Christ and we do not need to look for another.

The problem of fulfillment does not consist in the question of whether Christ is the one who fulfills the promises, but rather on the issue of *how* Christ fulfills the covenant and *when* He fulfills it. Concerning this question, there have been two principal answers: (1) Christ fulfills the promise by His present session at the right hand of the Father in heaven; (2) Christ fulfills the promise of His return and righteous reign on earth during the millennium. Interpreters of Scripture have usually adopted an answer to the problem which fits their larger system of doctrine. Those who deny a millennium or who identify

Israel and the church are apt to insist that Christ is fulfilling the covenant by His present session.[3] Cf. Louis Berkhof, *The Kingdom of God*, and Geerhardus Vos, *The Kingdom and the Church*. Those who believe in a literal millennium and a reign of Christ on earth affirm the second answer. In this obvious contradiction between two systems of interpretation, there are certain issues which determine the outcome. These issues may be reduced for our purpose to the following: (1) Does the Davidic covenant require literal fulfillment? (2) Does the partial fulfillment already a matter of history permit a literal fulfillment? (3) Is the interpretation of this covenant in harmony with other covenant purposes of God? (4) What does the New Testament teach regarding the present and future reign of Christ?

## **Does the Davidic Covenant Require Literal Fulfillment?**

If it were not for the difficulty of contradicting certain systems of interpretation of Scripture, it is doubtful whether anyone would have thought of interpreting the Davidic covenant otherwise than as requiring a literal fulfillment. The arguments in favor of literal interpretation are so massive in their construction and so difficult to waive that they are more commonly ignored by those who do not want to believe in literal fulfillment than answered by argument. Peters in *The Theocratic Kingdom*, Proposition 52, has listed no less than twenty-one arguments in favor of literal interpretation, not to include collateral material. His important arguments for literal interpretation may be summarized as follows: (1) the solemn character of the covenant which was confirmed by an oath. (2) A spiritual fulfillment would not be becoming to a solemn covenant. (3) Both David and Solomon apparently understood it to be literal (2 Sam 7:18-29; 2 Chron 6:14-16). (4) The language used, which is also used by the prophets, denotes a literal throne and kingdom. (5) The Jews plainly expected a literal fulfillment. (6) The throne and kingdom as a promise and inheritance belong to the humanity of Christ as the seed of David rather than belong to His deity. (7) There is no ground for identifying David's throne and the Father's throne. (8) A symbolical interpretation of the covenant leaves its interpretation to man. (9) The literal fulfillment is requisite to the display of God's government in the earth, necessary to the restoration and exaltation of the Jewish nation and deliverance of the earth from the curse. (10) Literal fulfillment is necessary to preserve the Divine unity of purpose.

Unless all of these weighty arguments be dismissed as utterly without foundation, it must be clear that there are good and important reasons for adopting a literal interpretation of the covenant promises. If a literal interpretation be adopted, the present session of Christ is not a fulfillment of the covenant, and it must be referred to the future. It is clear that at the present time Christ is not in any literal sense reigning over the kingdom of David. From the content and circumstances surrounding the Davidic covenant, it is evident that a literal fulfillment is anticipated.

## **Does the Historical Partial Fulfillment Permit a Literal Interpretation?**

There are, however, obvious difficulties in interpreting the Davidic covenant in a literal way and expecting a literal fulfillment. The covenant was given almost three thousand years ago, and history has not contained any continuous development or continued authority of the political kingdom of David. A question may be raised whether history permits a literal fulfillment of the covenant. Does not the fact, viz., of Israel's captivity, with the downfall of the kingdom of Israel argue against a literal fulfillment? Do not the centuries which have elapsed since the coming of Christ prove that no literal fulfillment is intended? If we believe that no word of God is broken, it is obvious that an interpretation which is not sustained by historic fulfillment is a wrong interpretation. The amillennial solution to this problem is that there is both a historical and a spiritual fulfillment. It is historical in that a literal descendant of David was born—Christ; it is spiritual in that the kingdom perpetuated and the throne are not literally David's but God's.[4] Cf. Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, unabridged edition, (Glasgow: William Collins, Sons, & Company, 1868), II, 235.

The difficulty with the interpretation of the Davidic covenant as fulfilled partly by temporal events and partly by a spiritualized interpretation is that it does not actually fulfill the covenant. A literal promise spiritualized is exegetical fraud. The point of the Davidic covenant is that the Son of David will possess the throne of His father David. To make His person literal but His throne a spiritualized concept is to nullify the promise.

This point is crystallized in the pronouncement of the angel to Mary quoted above (Luke 1:32-33). It should be perfectly obvious to any Bible student that Mary would understand the promise literally. She actually expected her prophesied Son to reign on an earthly Davidic throne. This expectation seems to have been shared by many others in the first century. How can anyone formulate a theodicy for the obvious deception that was perpetrated if Mary's idea was utterly wrong and it was never intended to perpetuate the earthly throne of David? The force of the prophecy to Mary is a precise and dramatic confirmation of the promise to David in spite of Israel's centuries of wandering, captivities, and sin. David. Accordingly, in the wisdom of God, the proof that Christ was of the line of David has been preserved, but at the same time the evidence has been destroyed for any future contenders for the honor. The Jews of today must admit that they could not positively identify the lineage of a Messiah if he did appear now. Only Christ has the evidence necessary, and the line is preserved with Him.

The partial fulfillment of the covenant, in that Christ is identified as the one through whom it will be fulfilled, instead of indicating a spiritual fulfillment rather lays the foundation for a literal fulfillment. The purpose of God is seen to be preserved in maintaining the line of David which has the right to rule. The postponement or delay in assuming political power in no wise invalidates the promise. The partial fulfillment in no wise hinders the literal fulfillment of all the covenant.

## **Is Literal Fulfillment in Harmony with Other Covenants?**

The interpretation of the Davidic covenant inevitably is colored by the construction placed on other covenants of Scripture. If the premillennial viewpoint of Scripture be sustained, it is clear that the Davidic covenant fits perfectly into the picture. It is the covenant ground for the earthly rule of Christ. All the promises regarding the nation Israel, the possession of the land, the millennial blessings in general, and the return of Christ to reign are in perfect harmony with a literal fulfillment of the covenant. The purpose of God in David is fulfilled in the reign of Christ. This has two aspects: His millennial reign and the continued rule of God in the new earth for eternity. The premillennial viewpoint provides a fully adequate literal fulfillment of the covenant.

Wilkinson has written a forceful summary of this point: "Nevertheless, facts are stubborn things. It is a fact that God has declared that Israel is not to cease from being a nation before Him for ever. It is a fact that the Jewish nation, still in unbelief, survivor of all others, alone retains its national identity.... It is a fact that the promise of a land (the territorial limits of which were defined) to the posterity of Abraham, as also the promise of a son of David's own line to occupy David's throne for ever, were unconditional promises, ratified by covenant and oath. It is a fact that the posterity of Abraham has never yet fully possessed and enjoyed the whole of the land so granted and that no son of David occupies David's throne.... The O.T. promises are all as certain of fulfillment in their O.T. sense and meaning and purpose to Israel, as are the N.T. promises certain of fulfillment to the Church." [5] Samuel Hinds Wilkinson, *The Israel Promises and Their Fulfilment* (London: John Bale, Sons and Danielsson, Ltd., 1936), pp. 56-57.

The literal fulfillment of the Davidic covenant is in harmony with the larger covenant purpose of God. In fact, its plain intent and the nature of the promises are another confirmation of the premillennial interpretation of Scripture. It provides an interpretation fully honoring to God and His Word.

## **The New Testament Teaching on the Reign of Christ**

Attention has already been called to the New Testament confirmation of the purpose of God to fulfill the Davidic covenant literally (Luke 1:32-33). The New Testament has in all fifty-nine references to David. It also has many references to the present session of Christ. A search of the New Testament reveals that *there is not one reference connecting the present session of Christ with the Davidic throne*. While this argument is, of course, not conclusive, it is almost incredible that in so many references to David and in so frequent reference to the present session of Christ on the Father's throne there should be not one reference connecting the two in any authoritative way. The New Testament is totally lacking in positive teaching that the throne of the Father in heaven is to be identified with the Davidic throne. The inference is plain that Christ is seated on the Father's throne, but that this is not at all the same as being seated on the throne of David.

About the only reference which can be construed as having any connection with the identification of David's kingdom reign and the present session of Christ is that found in Acts 15:14-17. After Paul's testimony of wonders wrought among the Gentiles, James addressed the council in these words: "Symeon hath rehearsed how first God visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After these things I will return, and I will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: that the residue of men may seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called" (Acts 15:14-17, A.S. V.).

The problem of this passage resolves into these questions: (1) What is meant by the "tabernacle of David"? (2) When is the "tabernacle of David" to be rebuilt? The first question is settled by an examination of its source, Amos 9:11, and its context. The preceding chapters and the first part of chapter nine deal with God's judgment upon Israel. It is summed up in the two verses which immediately precede the quotation: "For, lo, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all the nations, like as grain is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least kernel fall upon the earth. All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say, The evil shall not overtake nor meet us" (Amos 9:9-10).

Immediately following this passage of judgment is the promise of blessing *after* the judgment, of which the verse quoted in Acts fifteen is the first: "In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up its ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the nations that are called by my name, saith Jehovah that doeth this. Behold, the days come, saith Jehovah, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt. And I will bring back the captivity of my people Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them. And I will plant them upon their own land, and they shall no more be plucked up out of their land which I have given, them, saith Jehovah thy God" (Amos 9:11-15).

The context of the passage deals, then, with Israel's judgment. After this period, which is the period of Gentile opportunity, God will raise up the tabernacle of David, give Israel supremacy over Edom and the nations, bless their crops, regather Israel, restore their cities, and assure them that they will never again be dispersed. The entire passage confirms that the "tabernacle of David" is an expression referring to the whole nation of Israel, and that in contrast to the Gentile nations. By no possible stretch of the plain meaning of this passage can the "tabernacle of David" be made to be an equivalent of the New Testament church. The prophecy concerns the rebuilding of that which was fallen down. The "ruins" are to be rebuilt "as in the days of old." The nature of the blessings are earthly, territorial, and national, and have nothing to do with a spiritual church to which none of these blessings has been promised.

What then is the meaning of the quotation of James? What relation does it have to the problem faced by the council at Jerusalem? The question considered by the council was one of Gentile participation in the church. It apparently was difficult for the apostles to adjust themselves to equality with Gentiles in the gospel. The evident blessing of God upon the Gentiles, their salvation, and spiritual gifts were indisputable evidence that a change in approach to the Gentiles was necessary. They must face the fact that both Jew and Gentile were saved by grace in exactly the same manner. How was this to be reconciled with the promises of God to Israel? It is this which James answers.

He states, in effect, that it was God's purpose to bless the Gentiles as well as Israel, but in their order. God was to visit the Gentiles *first*, "to take out of them a people for his name." James goes on to say that this is entirely in keeping with the prophets, for they had stated that the period of Jewish blessing and triumph should be *after* the Gentile period: "After these things I will return, and I will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen." Instead of identifying the period of Gentile conversion with the rebuilding of the tabernacle of David, it is carefully distinguished by the *first* (referring to Gentile blessing), and *after this* (referring to Israel's coming glory). The passage, instead of identifying God's purpose for the church and for the nation Israel, established a specific time order. Israel's blessing will not come until "I return," apparently reference to the second coming of Christ. That it could not refer either to the incarnation or to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost is evident in that neither is a "return." The passage under consideration constitutes, then, an important guide in determining the purpose of God. God will first conclude His work for the Gentiles in the period of Israel's dispersion; then He will return to bring in the promised blessings for Israel. It is needless to say that this confirms the

interpretation that Christ is not now on the throne of David bringing blessing to Israel as the prophets predicted, but He is rather on His Father's throne waiting for the coming earthly kingdom and interceding for His own who form the church.

It is highly significant that as late as Acts 15 the disciples still needed instruction on the distinctions between the kingdom promises and the church. They had been encouraged throughout the earthly ministry of Christ to expect a literal fulfillment of the kingdom promises. As discussed in the previous treatment of the restoration of Israel,[6] *Bibliotheca Sacra*, "The Abrahamic Covenant and Premillennialism," October-December, 1952, p. 297. the promise given to Mary and Luke was embraced by the disciples as well. They expected the promise of the Davidic kingdom to be fulfilled immediately. They had been promised thrones from which they would judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28). The aspiring mother of James and John while rebuked in her hope that her sons would sit on either side of Christ in His kingdom was told that the place was for others—a confirmation of the fundamental kingdom hope. The disciples were promised a place at the King's table in the kingdom as a reward for their sufferings in this life (Luke 22:30). As late as Acts 1:6, the disciples were still looking for a literal kingdom. While refused revelation concerning the "time" of the kingdom, their hope is not denied, spiritualized, or transferred to the church. The kingdom hope is postponed and the new age of which they never dreamed was interposed, but the promises continued undimmed. Israel's day of glory is yet to come and the Christ will reign on earth.

Dallas, Texas

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"Some of the Old Testament prophets spoke before the exile, some during the exile, while others spoke after a remnant (but not the nation) had returned to their land. While they spoke with individual purpose and style, they were united as one voice on certain great themes. They condemned the nation's sin and predicted the coming chastisement. They saw the judgments about to fall upon the surrounding nations—but these Gentile judgments are in view only as they are related to Israel. Above all they saw their own future blessings, the form and manner of which are too accurately described by them to be misunderstood. Their prophecies expanded into magnificent detail the covenanted reign of David's Son over the house of Jacob forever. In tracing these passages scarcely a comment is necessary, if the statements are taken in their plain and obvious meaning."\*

\*Lewis Sperry Chafer, *The Kingdom in History and Prophecy* (copyright, 1915, pp. 26-27.

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 18

### Part 18: The New Covenant with Israel

Among the Biblical covenants of the Old Testament, the new covenant with Israel takes its place in importance with the Abrahamic and the Davidic covenants as determining the course and destiny of the nation Israel. In the study of premillennialism it is another important evidence for a future millennial kingdom in which its promises can find literal fulfillment.

#### The Promises of the New Covenant with Israel

The promises of the new covenant with Israel are among the most specific of the Scriptures. The major passage is found in Jeremiah 31:31-34: "Behold, the days come, saith Jehovah, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was a husband unto them, saith Jehovah. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith Jehovah: I will put my law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know Jehovah; for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith Jehovah: for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more" (A. S.V.).

#### The Problems of Interpretation

**Postmillennial Interpretation.** Three principal interpretations are found of this strategic Scripture corresponding to the postmillennial, amillennial, and premillennial interpretations. The view of Charles Hodge may be taken as representative of the postmillennial view, which is now discarded almost completely, though its optimism is preserved somewhat in modern liberalism. While abiding with the literal concept of the word Israel, Hodge finds the fulfillment of the promise in the later part of the interadvent age in blessing on Jews who believe in Christ. To put it in different words, he believed the new covenant would be fulfilled to Israel in the millennium or golden age just preceding the second advent.[1] Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1909), p. 589.

**Amillennial Interpretation.** A second interpretation characterizes the amillennial view as illustrated in the recent writings of Oswald T. Allis which express the sentiment of a considerable element of Reformed theology since Calvin. He identifies Israel with the church and transfers the promises of the new covenant to believers in Christ in this dispensation, both Jews and Gentiles. Allis states, "For the gospel age in which we are living is that day foretold by the prophets when the law of God shall be written in the hearts of men (Jer xxxi.33 ) and when the Spirit of God abiding in their hearts will enable them to keep it (Ezek xi.19 , xxxvi.26f )."[2] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1945), p. 42. This view differs from the position of Hodge in that it is a denial that the promises refer to Israel nationally and transfers them entirely to believers of this age.

**Premillennial Interpretation.** In contrast to the postmillennial and amillennial views, the premillennial position is that the new covenant is with Israel and the fulfillment in the millennial kingdom after the Second coming of Christ. Minor variations are found in the premillennial view of the new covenant based largely on the further light given in the New

Testament. The premillennial view popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible<sup>[3]</sup> Scofield Reference Bible, pp. 1297-98, note. regards the new covenant as having a twofold application, first to Israel fulfilled in the millennium, and, second, to the church in the present age. A better position is taken by Lewis Sperry Chafer who believes the new covenant in the Old Testament will be fulfilled only in the millennium, but finds also another new covenant revealed in the New Testament which has reference to the church in the present age. This conceives the sacrifice of Christ as making possible two covenants, a new covenant for Israel as well as a new covenant for the church.<sup>[4]</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), IV, 325. This view has the advantage of not complicating the promises given expressly to Israel with promises given to the church.

A third position, also premillennial, was advocated by J. N. Darby who held that the new covenant belonged to Israel alone in both Old and New Testaments though the church participates in the benefits of the sacrifice of Christ. He writes, “We enjoy indeed all the essential privileges of the new covenant, its foundation being laid on God’s part in the blood of Christ, but we do so in spirit, not according to the letter.”<sup>[5]</sup> J. N. Darby, *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, William Kelly, editor (London: G. Morrish, n.d.) *Doctrinal*, I, 286. Darby holds that “the gospel is not a covenant, but the revelation of the salvation of God.”<sup>[6]</sup> *Loc. cit.*

The premillennial view, though varying in details in the interpretation of the new covenant, insists that the new covenant as revealed in the Old Testament concerns Israel and requires fulfillment in the millennial kingdom. This is substantiated by a study of the contents of the covenant.

## **The Provisions of the New Covenant**

According to Jeremiah 31:31-34, previously quoted, at least seven aspects are found contained in the new covenant with Israel.

(1) It is specifically a covenant with “the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.” This was certainly understood by the Jews living in the Old Testament period as referring to Israel. The church and to restrict the passage to a spiritualized fulfillment of the details of the covenant robs the covenant of its essential features. The facts are not only stated closely in Jeremiah 31 and intended to be taken literally, but similar passages elsewhere have the same features.

Isaiah 61:8-9 declares that the covenant is everlasting and especially designed to reveal to all observers that God has blessed the seed of Israel. The context is the same as in Jeremiah—the covenant will be fulfilled following a period of trial and judgment and preceded by the regathering of Israel. Jeremiah repeats the same promises in Jeremiah 32:37-40 where again the everlasting character of the covenant and its relation to Israel’s regathering are reiterated.

Ezekiel 37:21-28 adds further confirmation: (1) Israel to be regathered; (2) Israel to be one nation, ruled by one king; (3) Israel no longer to be idolatrous, to be cleansed, forgiven; (4) Israel to dwell “forever” in the land after regathering; (5) the covenant of peace with them to be everlasting; (6) God’s tabernacle to be with them, i.e., He will be present with them in a visible way; (7) Israel to be known among Gentiles as a nation blessed of God. All of these promises are implicit in the basic passage of Jeremiah, but they confirm, enrich, and enlarge the covenant.

The present age of grace does not fulfill these provisions in many particulars. The events preceding the fulfillment have not taken place. Israel as a nation is not regathered, though many have returned to Palestine in our day. The great tribulation or the time of Jacob’s trouble is yet future. It is therefore impossible for the new covenant with Israel to be realized now. Israel today is not publicly recognized as God’s people, indeed, they do not claim any special privilege themselves. Certainly Israel as a nation is not being blessed of God in spiritual ways. Most obvious too is the fact that all do not know the Lord, making missionary effort or personal witness unnecessary. All do not know the Lord, and our neighbors still need to know Him. This is an age of missionary effort in contrast to the prophesied situation under which the new covenant will operate. Israel today is not being ruled by one king. God is not tabernacling with Israel now. All of these plain statements have to be ignored or spiritualized to avoid the premillennial teaching that the new covenant is designed for millennial conditions.

If taken in their ordinary literal sense, the promises of the new covenant as contained in Old Testament prophecy correspond precisely to the premillennial interpretation. Amillenarians have indirectly admitted this, first, by acknowledging that “Jewish” interpretation anticipated an earthly, literal reign of the Messiah in which the covenant would be fulfilled. It is their contention that the Jewish expectation was an error. Second, amillenarians indirectly admit the force of the premillennial argument by consistently avoiding exegesis of the precise promises given. The promises are usually grouped in a broad generality of promised spiritual blessing and appropriated by the device of making Israel mean the church or body of believers. Third, amillenarians have turned for the most part from exegesis of the new covenant in the Old Testament to supposed confirmation of their view in the New Testament. A recent illustration of this is the work of Allis.[7] Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 154. While he refers to it and identifies it with the grace extended to the church in the present age, he nowhere in his extensive treatment of premillennialism attempts to give a reasonable exegesis of the passage and explain the particulars of the covenant. It is safe to say that this is an impossibility without spiritualization of its provisions. The Old Testament taken alone would never have suggested the spiritualized interpretation adopted by the amillenarians. The question remains, What does the New Testament teach?

## **General Teaching of the New Testament on the New Covenant**

The term new covenant, is used only five times in the best texts of the New Testament (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8; 9:15 ). Other references to the new covenant without the precise designation include at least seven more instances (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Rom 11:27; Heb 8:10; 8:13 ; 10:16 ; 12:24 ). The references in the Gospels obviously refer to the new covenant as stated in Luke and also in some texts of Matthew and Mark. The context makes the reference clear in the other instances. Of special interest is Hebrews 12:24 where the expression is used for the new covenant—new in the sense of recent, the only such instance in the New Testament.

Of the five direct references to a new covenant, only one (Heb 8:8) is connected by the context directly with the new covenant of Jeremiah. While this does not solve the problem, as will be seen later, it certainly narrows the area of direct revelation. Of the auxiliary texts judged referring to the new covenant, Romans 11:27; Hebrews 8:10, 13, and 10:16 seem to have reference to the new covenant with Israel. The other references at least are not specific.

The general teaching of New Testament passages bearing upon the New Covenant is that the new covenant has been made possible by the sacrifice of Christ. Attention is drawn to this central aspect in passages dealing with the Lord’s Supper (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). Other passages enlarge on the grace of God and forgiveness of sins made possible by the death of Christ (Rom 11:27; Heb 8:8-13; 10:16-18 ). Christ is declared to be the Mediator of the new covenant (Heb 12:24). Whether the church of the present age or Israel is in view, the new covenant provides a basis in grace for forgiveness and blessing secured by the blood of Jesus Christ. On this all conservative theologians agree whether premillennial, amillennial, or postmillennial. The difference in point of view is occasioned by the question of whether the new covenant promised Israel is being fulfilled now, in the present interadvent age, as the amillenarians contend, or whether Israel’s new covenant will be fulfilled after the second coming of Christ in the millennial kingdom, as the premillenarians contend. Most premillenarians (Darby excepted) would agree that a new covenant has been provided for the church, but not the new covenant for Israel. The question resolves itself into one of exegesis of the principal passages.

## **The New Covenant for Israel in the New Testament**

Eliminating for the time being references to the new covenant in relation to the Lord’s Supper, which are not determinative in the present argument, what do the other passages of the New Testament teach? Romans 11:27 refers to the covenant as taking away sin from Israel. The context is illuminating. The time for the fulfillment of this covenant is stated in the preceding verse as being when the Deliverer shall come out of Zion. This is clearly identified with the second coming of Christ, the time when “all Israel shall be saved” (Rom 11:25). According to this passage the new covenant will have its fulfillment as a result of the second advent. This, of course, is precisely what the premillenarian believes and is absolutely contrary to the thought that the new covenant is in force for Israel now. The explicit teaching of this passage confirms the premillennial view.

Amillenarians find it convenient to ignore Romans 11:27. Wyngaarden, who has written extensively on the new covenant covering almost every Scripture reference, omits Romans 11:27 completely in his discussion in the Calvin Forum on “The New Covenant in Biblical Theology.”[8] Martin J. Wyngaarden, “The New Covenant in Biblical Theology,” The Calvin Forum, XI (May, 1946), 208-12. In his book, *The Future of the Kingdom in Prophecy and Fulfillment*, which on the whole is one of the best amillennial works on the subject, again there is no consideration whatever of the connection of the fulfillment of the new covenant with the second advent, and only one reference of any character at all to this verse .[9] Martin J. Wyngaarden, *The Future of the Kingdom in Prophecy and Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1934), p. 188.

Oswald Allis, while discussing Romans 11:25-26, does not even mention Romans 11:27 in his entire work in defense of amillenarianism.[10] Allis, *op. cit.* This illustrates a tendency in amillennial literature to avoid Scriptures which support the premillennial view.

Both Allis and Wyngaarden, however, devote considerable attention to the reference in Hebrews 8, and consider it an unanswerable argument in favor of their interpretation. It is, in fact, the only passage which provides any difficulty to the premillennial view, and this difficulty vanishes if the passage is carefully studied. The argument of Hebrews 8 reveals the truth that Christ is the Mediator of a better covenant than Moses, established upon better promises (Heb 8:6). The argument hangs on the point that the Mosaic covenant was not faultless—was never intended to be an everlasting covenant (Heb 8:7). In confirmation of this point, the new covenant of Jeremiah is cited at length, proving that the Old Testament itself anticipated the end of the Mosaic law in that a new covenant is predicted to supplant it. The writer of Hebrews singles out of the entire quotation, the one word new and argues that this would automatically make the Mosaic covenant old (Heb 8:13). A further statement is made that the old covenant is “becoming old” and “is nigh unto vanishing away.” It should be noted that nowhere in this passage is the new covenant with Israel declared to be in force. The only argument is that which was always true—the prediction of a new covenant automatically declares the Mosaic covenant as a temporary, not an everlasting covenant.

Amillenarians, however, completely ignore the silence of the passage on the very point they are trying to prove. Allis writes enthusiastically: “The passage speaks of the new covenant. It declares that this new covenant has been already introduced and that by virtue of the fact that it is called ‘new’ it has made the one which it is replacing ‘old,’ and that the old is about to vanish away. It would be hard to find a clearer reference to the gospel age in the Old Testament than in these verses in Jeremiah.”[11] Allis, *ibid.*, p. 154.

While Allis has done all he could to claim this passage in support of his amillennial position, he has also indicated the fallacy of the amillennial argument by flagrantly begging the question. He states that the passage “declares that this new covenant has been already introduced.”[12] *Loc. cit.* A careful reading of the passage will reveal it makes no such statement. It declares a “better covenant” than the Mosaic covenant has been introduced (Heb 8:6), but it does not state here or anywhere else that this better covenant is “the new covenant with the house of Israel,” or that Israel’s new covenant has been introduced. Allis not only reads in statements which are not to be found in this passage, but also ignores the argument of the writer of Hebrews. The argument does not depend upon the introduction of the new covenant for Israel, but only on the question of whether the Old Testament anticipates an end to the Mosaic covenant. The fact that the Old Testament predicts a new covenant for Israel establishes this point.

It should be further noted that if the writer had intended to argue that the provisions of the new covenant were already in force, he would certainly have used the various aspects of the new covenant as quoted. Instead, no use whatever is made of the details of the covenant except for the one word new. It would have been a crushing argument to contenders for the law of Moses if, in fact, the new covenant was already in force and its prophecy fulfilled. This would have ended the argument quickly. Instead, the writer contends merely for the superiority of the Christian order as superseding the Mosaic covenant. The new covenant in force in the present age is not claimed to fulfill the new covenant with Israel at all.

While amillenarians are usually content to argue from Hebrews 8, another passage of the same character is found in Hebrews 10:16-17 (which Allis does not even mention). Here the argument hangs upon the essential grace character of the

new covenant with Israel, which is again quoted in part. The point is made that the new covenant with Israel not only anticipated the abrogation of the law but also the end of Mosaic sacrifices as a basis for forgiveness. In that God promises to remember their sins no more, it requires a sacrifice for sin which does not need to be repeated. All agree that the death of Christ provides the gracious basis both for the new covenant with the church and the new covenant with Israel. The death of Christ has ushered in a day of grace enjoyed now by every believer, and to be enjoyed by the nation Israel in the millennial kingdom also.

Further light is cast on the problem in the unusual reference in Hebrews 12:24 where new is the translation of the meaning recent. Jesus is declared to be the Mediator of the new covenant in the sense of a recent covenant. The time element is in contrast to the old covenant, i.e., the Mosaic, which has been in force for many centuries. Reference is apparently to the covenant with the church and not to Israel's new covenant. Hebrews 9:15 likewise declares that Christ is the Mediator "of a new covenant," which is true, of course, both for a covenant with the church or a covenant with Israel.

## **The New Covenant with Believers of This Age**

Premillenarians are in agreement that the new covenant with Israel awaits its complete fulfillment in the millennial kingdom. However, there exists some difference of opinion how the new covenant relates to the present interadvent age. Particular attention is paid to Luke 22:20 and the parallel synoptic passages (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24) where the disciples are introduced to the Lord's Supper and informed that the cup represents the blood of the new covenant. Some premillenarians like Darby[13] Darby, loc. cit. believe the church is related only to the blood of the new covenant—the gracious ground of the new covenant, rather than the new covenant itself. It is true, of course, that the Old Testament covenants in general belonged to Israel, as brought out in Romans 9:4 (cf. Eph 2:12). Scofield, however, regards the new covenant with Israel as having an oblique reference to the believers of this age, though concerned primarily with Israel.[14] Scofield Reference Bible, loc. cit. Preference was stated earlier in this study for another view advanced by Lewis Sperry Chafer[15] Chafer, loc. cit. advocating two new covenants, one for the nation Israel to be fulfilled in the millennium, the other for the church to be fulfilled in the present age. The point of view that holds to two covenants has certain advantages. It provides a sensible reason for establishing the Lord's Supper for believers in this age in commemoration of the blood of the new covenant. The language of 1 Corinthians 11:25 seems to require it: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood: this do, as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of me." It hardly seems reasonable to expect Christians to distinguish between the cup and the new covenant when these appear to be identified in this passage. In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul speaking of himself states, "Our sufficiency is of God: who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant." It would be difficult to adjust the ministry of Paul as a minister of the new covenant if, in fact, there is no new covenant for the present age. Even Darby, who seems to have originated this idea, states, "We enjoy indeed all the essential privileges of the new covenant, its foundation being laid on God's part in the blood of Christ, but we do so in spirit, not according to the letter." [16] {Footnote particulars missing in original printed edition} It can be seen that this is not far from Scofield's idea of a double application. The issues of premillennialism have been focused with increasing sharpness in recent years until the line has been drawn between Israel's promises and those belonging to the church. The concept of two new covenants is a better analysis of the problem and more consistent with premillennialism as a whole. The amillennial argument breaks down, however, not on the basis of these finer distinctions but the obvious failure in the present age of any literal fulfillment of the covenant with Israel. As in other particulars of prophecy concerning the millennium, a literal fulfillment demands a future millennial dispensation.

## **Conclusion**

The conclusions drawn from this study of the new covenant, while only a partial analysis of the covenant itself, point to future fulfillment of Jeremiah's covenant. The key texts such as Hebrews 8, upon which the amillennial theory bases most of its argument, upon analysis fail to provide any proof for its contentions. Further, such passages as Romans 11:27 in the New Testament predict fulfillment of the new covenant as an outgrowth of the second advent, not the first coming of Christ, and therefore awaiting the return of Christ to establish His kingdom on earth. As in other areas of the millennial doctrine, the argument hangs upon the question of literal interpretation. Only by spiritualizing the promises and ignoring contradictory Scripture can the amillennial concept of the new covenant be sustained.

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 19

### Part 19: Premillennialism and the Church

The doctrine of the church has always rightly been considered an important part of theology. Embraced within its revelation are the principal items of the present divine program as well as the ultimate purpose of God. According to Lewis Sperry Chafer, the truth concerning the church is one of the two major Pauline revelations given in the New Testament, the other being the gospel of salvation by faith. [1] Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, IV, 3-4.

It is strange that more attention has not been paid to the relation of ecclesiology to premillennialism. Various views on the millennium have their corresponding concepts of the church in the present age. Amillennialism identifies the present church age with the predicted millennial kingdom on earth. Premillennialism places the millennium after the second advent and therefore divorces it from the present church age. It is not too much to say that ecclesiology may be characterized as being either amillennial or premillennial. [2] Cf. John F. Walvoord, "Amillennial Ecclesiology," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 107:420-29, October-December, 1950. Premillennialism has, then, an important bearing on the doctrine of the church, and vice versa. Many of the important aspects of premillennialism are determined in ecclesiology rather than in eschatology. The doctrine of the church must, therefore, be carefully examined before eschatology can be understood.

### Major Types of Ecclesiology

Various points of view of the doctrine of the church are afforded respectively in the Roman, Greek, and Protestant churches. Again distinctions are raised in regard to the church as an institution and as an organism, and the church as visible and invisible. [3] Cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 562-78. The church can also be considered in regard to its form of church government, officers, and sacraments. There are few doctrines which have as many facets as ecclesiology. As bearing on premillennialism, however, ecclesiology can be classified into three types: covenant theology, kingdom theology, and dispensational theology.

*Covenant theology in relation to premillennialism.* As indicated in earlier studies of the Biblical covenants, covenant theology characteristically belongs to amillennial and postmillennial theology, but there have always been adherents of covenant theology who could be classified as premillennial. Covenant theology, in a word, conceives the purpose of God as essentially soteriological, or concerned with the salvation of the elect. The unfolding of the successive ages of God's dealings with men is, then, the fulfillment of the divine purpose supposedly embraced in an eternal covenant within the Godhead. This normally issues in a merging of Israel and the church and the point of view which considers the Old Testament, the present age, and the future millennium essentially parts of one progressive purpose. The strongest proponents of covenant theology today are Reformed churches still adhering clearly to Calvin and conservative theology. These are usually amillennial rather than premillennial and are opposed to dispensational theology. Premillenarians who hold to covenant theology are often quite similar to amillenarians in their exegesis of passages relating to the present age, but as premillenarians they add a millennial age after the second advent on the basis of Revelation 20 and many other passages.

*Kingdom theology.* Another type of ecclesiology is afforded by those who emphasize kingdom ideology in the Scriptures. While this is often identical with covenant theology, it is not necessarily so. The kingdom of God is regarded as the embrace term including the church in the present age and the millennium in the future. Like covenant theology, however, it tends to identify the kingdom as soteriological rather than governmental and to all practical purposes it is covenant theology all over again but without the covenantal background specifically. [4] Cf. George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions about*

*the Kingdom of God*, pp. 80-85, 92-94. To some extent kingdom theology has been carried over into modern liberalism with its identification of the kingdom as the whole purpose of God in human history, often reducing it to a simple moral concept. Kingdom theology as a whole tends to minimize the distinctive character of the millennial kingdom and to make it an aspect of kingdom truth such as is found throughout human history. Like covenant theology it is more in harmony with amillennial theology than with premillennial, but it has nevertheless had its place within premillennialism.

*Dispensational theology.* While the dispensational idea is as old as theology itself, with elaborate dispensational systems being evolved even before Christ, in recent years the term has been applied to a specific point of view taught by modern dispensationalists. Dispensationalism in the past was not confined to premillennialism, and well-defined systems of dispensationalism are found in Augustine, an amillenarian, in Hodge, a postmillenarian, and in practically all Protestant systematic theologians. In the contemporary meaning of the term, however, dispensationalism is largely confined to premillennialism. While not denying an essential unity to divine dealings in human history, it distinguishes major stewardships or purposes of God, particularly as revealed in three important dispensations of law, grace, and kingdom. Saints of the present age are regarded as fulfilling the present purpose of God to call out a body of saints from Jew and Gentile alike. By contrast Old Testament saints are considered a separate people and in particular Israel is regarded as fulfilling a purpose of God peculiarly for them. The future millennium is considered a separate age, different from either the law or grace periods, and having a form of stewardship distinct from all previous dispensations. Christ did not say, “I am building,” but “I will build.” It is significant that this is the first reference to the church in the New Testament, and is here regarded as a future undertaking of Christ Himself.

*The body of Christ formed at Pentecost.* In Acts 1:5, Christ predicted, “John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized in the Holy Spirit not many days hence.” Ten days later was the Day of Pentecost. As far as the record of Acts 2 is concerned, nothing is said of the baptism of the Spirit. In Acts 11:15, however, in relating the story of the conversion of Cornelius Peter states, “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, even as on us at the beginning.” In the next verse he cites this as fulfilling the prophecy of Christ in Acts 1:5. The baptism of the Spirit which is the subject of predictive prophecy in the Gospels and in Acts 1 finds its first fulfillment in Acts 2.

The classic passage on the baptism of the Holy Spirit, 1 Corinthians 12:13, declares: “For in [by] one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free; and were all made to drink of one Spirit.” The baptism of the Spirit is the act of God by which the individual believer in Christ is placed into the body of Christ. The Greek preposition *en*, translated “in” in the American Standard Version, is properly rendered “by” in both the Authorized and the Revised Standard Version in recognition of its instrumental use. The Spirit is the agent by whom the work of God is accomplished.

In virtue of these significant truths, it becomes apparent that a new thing has been formed—the body of Christ. It did not exist before Pentecost as there was no work of the baptism of the Spirit to form it. The concept of the body is foreign to the Old Testament and to Israel’s promises. Something new had begun. Peter declares that Pentecost was a new beginning (Acts 11:15). Saved Israelites under the old economy were placed into the body of Christ at Pentecost (cf. Gal 3:28; Eph 2:14-15). Thereafter the church is distinguished from both Jew and Gentile (1 Cor 10:32; Heb 12:22-24). The church as the body of Christ is therefore a new entity, and the term *ecclesia* when used in this sense is used only of saints of the present dispensation.

## **The Church Age as a Parenthesis**

One of the important questions raised by the amillenarians is whether the present age is predicted in the Old Testament. This they confidently affirm and find the kingdom promises fulfilled in the present church age. Premillenarians have not always given a clear answer to the amillennial position. While dispensationalists have regarded the present age as a parenthesis unexpected and without specific prediction in the Old Testament, some premillenarians have tended to strike a compromise interpretation in which part of the Old Testament predictions are fulfilled now and part in the future. In some cases they have conceded so much to the amillenarians that for all practical purposes they have surrendered premillennialism as well. It is the purpose of the present investigation to show the reasonableness and Scriptural support of the parenthesis concept.

*Daniel's seventieth week for Israel.* One of the classic passages related to this problem is Daniel 9:27, defining the last of Daniel's weeks for the fulfillment of Israel's program. As generally interpreted the time unit in the "weeks" or "sevens" is taken to be a year. Conservative scholars usually trace the fulfillment of the first sixty-nine sevens of years as culminating in the crucifixion of Christ, predicted in the terms that "the anointed one be cut off and shall have nothing" (Dan 9:26). While the most literal interpretation of the first sixty-nine sevens is thus afforded a literal fulfillment, nothing can be found in history that provides a literal fulfillment of the last seven or the seventieth week. It has been taken by many that this indicates a postponement of the fulfillment of the last seven years of the prophecy to the future preceding the second advent. If so, a parenthesis of time involving the whole present age is indicated.

This proposal has been rejected by the liberal, by the amillenarian, and by some premillenarians, particularly those who are not dispensationalists. Philip Mauro, an amillenarian, states flatly, "Never has a specified number of time-units, making up a described stretch of time, been taken to mean anything but *continuous* or *consecutive* time units." [5] Philip Mauro, *The Seventy Weeks and the Great Tribulation*, p. 95.

It should be obvious to careful students of the Bible that Mauro is not only begging the question but is overlooking abundant evidence to the contrary. Nothing should be plainer to one reading the Old Testament than that the foreview therein provided did not predict a period of time between the two advents. This very fact confused even the prophets (cf. 1 Pet 1:10-12). At best such a time interval was only implied. In the very passage involved, Daniel 9:24-27, it is indicated that there would be a time interval. The anointed one, or the Messiah, is cut off after the sixty-ninth week, but not in the seventieth. Such a circumstance could be true only if there were a time interval between these two periods.

*Many illustrations of parentheses in the Old Testament.* As H. A. Ironside has made clear in his thorough study of this problem, [6] H. A. Ironside, *The Great Parenthesis*, 131 pp. there are more than a dozen instances of parenthetical periods in the divine program. In Luke 4:18-20, quoting Isaiah 61:2, obviously the present age now extending over 1900 years intervenes between the "acceptable year of the Lord" and the "day of vengeance of our God." There is no indication in the Isaiah passage of any interval at all, but Christ stopped abruptly in the middle of the sentence in His quotation in Luke thus indicating the division. A similar spanning of the entire church age is found in Hosea 3:4 as compared to 3:5 and Hosea 5:15 as compared with 6:1. Psalm 22 predicts the sufferings of Christ (Ps 22:1-21), anticipates the resurrection of Christ (Ps 22:22), and then in the remainder of the psalm deals with millennial conditions without a reference to the present age. This characteristic is found in much of Messianic prophecy in the Old Testament.

The prophetic foreview of Daniel 2 in Nebuchadnezzar's image and the fourth beast of Daniel 7:23-27 likewise ignores the present age. Daniel 8:24 seems to refer to Antiochus Epiphanes (B.C. 170), whereas Daniel 8:25 leaps the entire present age to discuss the future beast of Revelation 13 who will appear after the church age is concluded. A similar instance is found in Daniel 11:35 as compared with Daniel 11:36. Psalm 110:1 speaks of Christ in heaven and Psalm 110:2 refers to His ultimate triumph at His second advent.

Ironside suggests that Peter stops in the middle of his quotation of Psalm 34:12-16 in 1 Peter 3:10-12 because the last part of Psalm 34:16 seems to refer to future dealings of God with sin in contrast to present discipline. [7] *Ibid.*, p. 44. The truth of a parenthesis is implied in Matthew 24 where the present age is described as preceding and intervening between the cross and the sign foretold by Daniel 9:27 (cf. Matt 24:15). Acts 15:13-21, discussed in previous study of premillennialism, makes sense when it is understood that the present age intervenes between the cross and the future blessing of Israel in the millennium.

Even in types, the interval is anticipated. The yearly schedule of feasts for Israel separates widely those prefiguring the death and resurrection of Christ and those anticipating Israel's regathering and glory. In the New Testament, the use of the olive tree as a figure in Romans 11 involves the three stages: (1) Israel in the place of blessing; (2) Israel cut off and the Gentiles in the place of blessing; (3) the Gentiles cut off and Israel grafted in again. The present age and Israel's time of discipline and judgment coincide and constitute a parenthesis in the divine program for Israel.

Sir Robert Anderson in regard to 1 Kings 6:1 finds the discrepancy of 480 years as opposed to 573 years, which was the

actual length of time for the period from the departure from Egypt to the building of the temple, is solved by subtracting 93 years during which Israel was cast off as a nation—five different periods of time (Judg 3:8, 14; 4:2-3 ; 6:1 ; 13:1 ). If Anderson's findings are accepted, it provides a clear illustration of time intervals embedded in a chronological program of the Old Testament.

The ultimate proof of the teaching that the present age is a parenthesis is in the positive revelation concerning the church as the body of Christ, the study of which will be undertaken next. The evidence for a parenthesis in the present age interrupting God's predicted program for Jew and Gentile as revealed in the Old Testament is extensive, however. The evidence if interpreted literally leads inevitably to the parenthesis doctrine. The kingdom predictions of the Old Testament do not conform to the pattern of this present age. Amillenarians from Augustine down to the present make no pretense of interpreting these prophecies in the same literal way as premillenarians. Those among the premillennial group who see clearly the issues involved would do well to divorce themselves from the amillennial method in dealing with the prophetic word, and interpret the prophecies of the Old Testament in relation to the millennium rather than the present age.

Dallas, Texas

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 20

### Part 20: Premillennialism and the Church as a Mystery

In the previous study of premillennialism and the church, it was brought out that the church is a body of believers in this age distinct in character from the Old Testament saints. Further, it was shown that the present age is a parenthesis or a time period not predicted by the Old Testament and therefore not fulfilling or advancing the program of events revealed in the Old Testament foreview. The present study occupies itself with the positive revelation in the New Testament of the church in its character as a mystery.

The question is whether the main elements of the church in the present age which are revealed as mysteries support the conclusion that the church is a purpose of God separate from Israel. It should be obvious that this is vital to premillennialism. If the church fulfills the Old Testament promises to Israel of a righteous kingdom on earth, the amillenarians are right. If the church does not fulfill these predictions and in fact is the fulfillment of a purpose of God not revealed until the New Testament, then the premillennarians are right. A study of the mysteries related to the church which are revealed in the New Testament is an important contribution to the positive evidence in favor of premillennialism.

The church is never expressly called a mystery. The term *mystery* is used, however, of the distinctive elements of the truth concerning the church as the body of Christ. Contemporary with the apostolic age various mystery cults held sway. They were so called because their rites of initiation were mysteries or secrets to those not in the cult. Initiation consisted of various rites in which the novitiate was introduced to these mysteries. The word came therefore to be used of significant facts once hidden but now revealed.

This idea is carried forward in the New Testament in passages where pivotal truths concerning the church as the body of Christ are described as mysteries. The truths thus revealed are not incomprehensible or obscure, as is sometimes meant by the modern use of the word *mystery*. It is rather that the truth relating to the church was once hidden, i.e., in the Old Testament, but is now revealed in the New Testament. Edwards correctly defines the word *mystery*, “a secret imparted only to the initiated, what is unknown until it is revealed, whether it be easy or hard to understand.”[1] D. Miall Edwards, “Mystery,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, III, 2104.

### The Mystery of the One Body

The New Testament revelation concerning the mystery of the one body is given in express terms in Ephesians 3:1-12. While the truth is an unfolding of the nature of the church in the present age and the relation of Gentiles to it, this passage has a vital bearing on the millennial issue. Allis devotes a whole chapter on “Paul’s Doctrine of the Church” to the exegesis of this one passage in an effort to sustain his attack on the premillennial position.[2] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, pp. 90-110. It is lamentable, however, that he ignores so many other pertinent passages in the process.

*Content of the mystery.* In the Ephesian passage the content of the mystery is stated: “...by revelation was made known unto me the mystery, as I wrote before in few words, whereby, when ye read, ye can perceive my understanding in the mystery of Christ; which is other generations was not made known unto the sons of men, as it hath now been revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to wit, that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs, and fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ through the gospel” (Eph 3:3-6). The purpose of the revelation is given in the words: “to make all men see what is the dispensation of the mystery which for ages hath been hid in God who created all things” (Eph

3:9).

Even an ordinary reading of this passage will reveal the central feature of the mystery. It is that Gentiles should have an absolute equality with the Jews in the body of Christ: “fellow-heirs,” “fellow-members,” and “fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ through the gospel.” This central fact is admitted by Allis in these words: “The mystery is, that the Gentiles are to enjoy, actually do enjoy, a status of *complete* equality with the Jews in the Christian Church.... They belong to the same body.... This important feature of the Christian Church was the mystery.”[3] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

*Was the mystery partially revealed in the Old Testament?* Having agreed with premillenarians on the central meaning of the passage, however, Allis takes back with his left hand what he has conceded with his right. His thought is that the mystery was not completely hidden, but only partially hidden: “It was a mystery in the sense that, like other teachings which are spoken of as such, it was not fully revealed in the Old Testament and was completely hidden from the carnally minded.”[4] *Loc. cit.* He believes that this point of view is sustained by two arguments: first, in the text itself by the qualifying “as” clause, and, second, by his argument that “Clearly the equality of Gentile with Jew was predicted in the Old Testament.”[5] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

According to Allis, there are three limitations on the thought that the mystery was a new truth: “This declaration taken by itself would seem to imply that it was absolutely new. So we must note that it is at once qualified by three supplementary and limiting statements: (1) ‘as it hath now been revealed,’ (2) ‘unto his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit,’ (3) ‘that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs, and fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.’”[6] *Ibid.*, p. 91. It should be clear to any impartial observer that Allis is straining to tone down and qualify the tremendous revelation given in this passage. The second and third points of his “supplementary and limiting statements” are nothing of the sort, but rather very important details of the mystery itself. Point two indicates the channel—New Testament apostles and prophets, and point three the content of the mystery itself. Referring to these points as limitations would be like considering the deity and humanity of Christ as “supplementary and limiting” attributes of the Second Person.

The first point of his series of three is the only point worthy of debate. Just what is the significance of the clause “as it hath now been revealed”? According to Allis, the meaning is that the mystery was not revealed in the Old Testament as it is now revealed—*i.e.*, it was revealed but in lesser detail and was not comprehended then.

Any student of the New Testament Greek will find it rather amazing that a scholarly writer would in this way ignore the other possibilities in this grammatical construction. Allis is assuming that the only possible interpretation is a restrictive clause. The Greek word  $\omega\varsigma$ , here translated “as,” is subject to many interpretations. It is used principally as a relative adverb of manner and as a conjunction in the New Testament. A. T. Robertson in one of many discussions of this word lists its various uses as “exclamatory,” “declarative,” “temporal,” and used with superlatives, comparatives, and correlatives.[7] A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, pp. 967-69. He notes further that basically most clauses of this kind are “adjectival.”[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 953-54. While used in an adverbial clause in this passage, the force grammatically is relative.[9] *Loc. cit.* Robertson says significantly in this connection, “The relative clause may indeed have the resultant effect of cause, condition, purpose or result, but in itself it expresses none of these things. It is like the participle in this respect. *One must not read into it more than is there*” (italics added).[10] *Ibid.*, p. 956. This warning evidently has not been heeded by Allis in his discussion. He has assumed that a clause which is normally an adjectival idea, *i.e.*, merely giving additional information, is a restrictive—qualifying absolutely the preceding statement. In support of his arbitrary classification of this clause, he supplies no grammatical argument whatever, and gives the impression that his interpretation is the only possible one.

Stifler in his discussion, of the “as” clause refutes the position of Allis and cites Acts 2:15 and 20:24 as substantiating evidence: “The contrast here, as Colossians i.26 shows, is between the other ages and ‘now.’ It may be further remarked on this Ephesian passage that the ‘as’ does not give a comparison between degrees of revelation in the former time and ‘now.’ It denies that there was any revelation at all of the mystery in that former time; just as if one should tell a man born blind that the sun does not shine in the night as it does in daytime. It does not shine at all by night. Certainly there is no comparison by ‘as’ in Acts ii.15 ; xx.24 . ‘As’ with a negative in the preceding clause has not received the attention which it

deserves. It is sometimes almost equivalent to ‘but’ (1 Cor vii.31 ).”[11] James M. Stifler, *The Epistle to the Romans, a Commentary Logical and Historical*, p. 273.

In other words, the “as” clause is purely descriptive and does not qualify the mystery as only partially hidden in the Old Testament. The evidence is definitely in favor of the interpretation which regards the mystery as completely hidden until revealed in the New Testament.

Allis states in the early part of his discussion, that the word mystery occurs “29 times in the New Testament.”[12] Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 90. Of these many instances the passage in Ephesians is the only one with the “as” clause. The others make the most absolute statements about the mystery being hidden. Allis carefully avoids a passage like Colossians 1:26 where the mystery is stated in absolute terms as completely hidden: “even the mystery which hath been hid for ages and generations: but now hath it been manifested to his saints.” If there is any question about the interpretation of this clause it should be settled by parallel passages which point clearly to the idea that the “as” clause is merely added information—descriptive or adjectival rather than restrictive.

Allis justifies his exegesis by claiming that the general equality of Gentile and Jew is predicted clearly in the Old Testament. In his own words he states, “Clearly, the equality of Gentile with Jew was predicted in the Old Testament.” A search of his argument for proof-texts on this point reveals none whatever. In other words, the two most important aspects of his argument are asserted but not proved.

The fact is that the thought of equality of Jew and Gentile is never mentioned in the great kingdom passages of the Old Testament. The Jews correctly interpreted such passages as Isaiah 61:5-6 as indicating their supremacy in the predicted kingdom age: “And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers. But ye shall be named priests of Jehovah; men shall call you the ministers of our God: ye shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their glory shall ye boast yourselves.” Isaiah 2:1-4 teaches the same truth of Israel’s exaltation in the kingdom age. The seat of government shall be in Jerusalem and from Zion the law will go forth.

It is true, as Allis points out, that Gentiles are promised great blessing in the kingdom age. They are promised salvation, material blessing, peace, tranquillity, and a share in the glory of that era. None of these promised blessings are extended to Gentiles on the ground of equality, however, and this is the point of the mystery.

*Does the Old Testament teach the doctrine of the one body?* The crux of the issue is whether Jews and Gentiles are presented as the same body in the Old Testament. Any literal interpretation of the Old Testament will make plain that the purpose of God revealed for Israel in the millennial kingdom is quite different from the purpose of God in the present age in relation to the church as the body of Christ. Only by spiritualizing the Old Testament prophetic passages can the viewpoint of Allis be sustained. Allis himself admits this in the following statement: “This conception of the mystery is entirely due to the insistence of Dispensationalists that the kingdom promises to Israel must be literally fulfilled, and therefore that the complete equality of Jew with Gentile in the Church is utterly at variance with the Old Testament and necessitates the view that the Church age is quite distinct from the kingdom age.”[13] *Ibid*, p. 99. In other words, the only way he can sustain his contention that the mystery is not wholly new is by application of the spiritualizing principle of interpretation to the key passages of the Old Testament. The Old Testament strictly maintains the distinction between Jew and Gentile, distinguishes their hope, their promises, and God’s dealing with them. That is the main point of the Old Testament. The idea that Jews and Gentiles might be united in one entity without any distinction whatever, with equal privileges, rights, and fellowship is foreign to the Old Testament.

*Relation to premillennialism.* Of importance to premillennialism is the obvious conclusions that if God’s present dealings with the body of Christ do not fulfill His promises concerning the kingdom age then a future fulfillment is demanded. The central concept of the church as the body of Christ including Jew and Gentile on an equal basis is described as a mystery in this passage. As such, it is described as “not made known” and “hid in God” until the time of the New Testament. This one passage certainly constitutes a stumbling block to any interpretation which attempts to find millennial kingdom promises fulfilled in the present age.

# The Church as an Organism

Of the mysteries relating to the church, the revelation in Colossians of the church as an organism is most important. In the mystery of the one body, the equality of Jew and Gentile is stressed. In this mystery the church as an organism is presented with the distinctive feature of being indwelt by Christ Himself.

*Christ in you.* In Colossians 1:26-27 the central feature of this mystery is described as the fact of the indwelling Christ: “The mystery which hath been hid for ages and generations: but now hath it been manifested to his saints, to whom God was pleased to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” The passage begins by affirming in most absolute terms that the truth here revealed was “hid for ages and generations.” The truth is then defined as “Christ in you.” It is significant that Allis in his argument attempting to show that truth concerning the church as the body of Christ was partially revealed in the Old Testament does not so much as mention this verse of Scripture. The truth is that the Old Testament, while speaking of the coming Messiah both in suffering and in glory, never once anticipates such a situation, as “Christ in you.” While some passages picture the Holy Spirit as indwelling the believer in the coming kingdom, the Second Person is never so presented.

In the preceding context (Col 1:24), the entity thus indwelt by Christ is identified as the body and the church. The enlarging revelation comprehends the church as the body of both Jew and Gentile believers in this age indwelt by Christ Himself. This, of course, has been predicted by Christ in the Upper Room in John 14:20, and was a part of His prayer in John 17:23. Here is amazing condescension—the Lord of glory dwelling in vessels of clay. The truth is described as “the riches of the glory of this mystery” and the fact of the indwelling Christ is called “the hope of glory.”

Everything in this passage stands in contrast to the Old Testament doctrine of the millennial kingdom. There the glory of the Lord will be manifest to all the earth and His dwelling is with men. Here His glory is veiled, but His presence is the hope of future glory. It is difficult to imagine a greater contrast between the position of Christ in the believer in this age and the position of Christ in the millennial kingdom.

*Christ the fullness of the Godhead bodily.* The significance of this tremendous revelation is subject to enlargement in later portions of Colossians. In Colossians 2:9-19 Christ is presented as possessing “all the fulness of the Godhead bodily,” with the result that those who are indwelt by Christ are also “made full,” or complete. On this ground they are warned against fleshly observance of ordinances or worshiping of angels. By contrast, Christ is the “Head, from whom all the body, being supplied and knit together through the joints and bands, increaseth with the increase of God” (Col 2:19). Here again, as the theme of the mystery is enlarged, there is truth utterly foreign to Israel’s covenants. Israel is regarded as a nation, a theocracy, and people, among whom God dwells. The church is regarded as a living organism in whom Christ dwells, united by vital life and growing by inner spiritual supply. Again it may be seen that, while the church itself is not described by the term *mystery*, the central features of the church are. In other words, if the qualities observed here which are the very essence of the church in the present age are described as mysteries, it is not too much to regard the church itself as unheralded in the Old Testament.

*The indwelling Christ the hope of glory.* As far as the Old Testament foreview is concerned, Israel’s hope of glory was the glorious return of Christ in His second advent. They were promised a share in His glorious government of the earth during the kingdom. By contrast, for the believer now the indwelling Christ is declared to be the “hope of glory” (Col 1:27). This thought is enlarged in Colossians 3.

In Colossians 3:4 it is revealed, “When Christ, who is our life, shall be manifested, then shall ye also with him be manifested in glory.” The indwelling Christ is integral with the believer’s hope. He is equated with our present existence as “our life” and with our future as the promise of fully manifested glory when He is glorified. The ultimate goal of spiritual experience is reached in Colossians 3:11 when the believer enters into the truth, that “Christ is all, and in all.”

The revelation given in Colossians is in sharp contrast to the Old Testament revelation. Allis misses the point when he

identifies the mystery as “Christ” or the “gospel” or the “will” of God, or “the faith.”[14] *Ibid.*, p. 90. The mystery is not in the general truths relating to Christ or the gospel, but in the particular detail which is revealed in this context. The mystery is Christ indwelling. Allis is partly right that the person involved or general subject is not entirely unknown in a mystery.[15] *Loc. cit.* It is the particular truth revealed for the first time that is the mystery. An examination of these particular truths reveal that they are the distinctive qualities relating to the church in contrast to Israel’s promises.

The two great mysteries which have been discussed thus far constitute the essential and distinctive qualities of the church. The mysteries considered are in sharp contrast to anything known to Israel in either history or prophecy. The church is composed of Jew and Gentile on exactly the same terms and the same fellowship, united in the one body of Christ in such a way that both are cut off from their distinctive national program and introduced into vitally different order. In this new relationship, they enjoy individually the indwelling presence of Christ as the ground of present experience and hope of future glory. The church historically has lost much by the blurring of these distinctive truths in the attempt to combine the spiritual destinies of Israel and the church. While in themselves they are sufficient to label the church as a mystery on the ground that its essential qualities are mysteries, these truths are supported by two other great mysteries which point to the same conclusion, namely, the mystery of the translation of the saints and the mystery of the bride. These are next to be considered.

Dallas, Texas

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 21

### Part 21: Premillennialism and the Church as a Mystery

(Continued from the January-March Number, 1954)

#### The Mystery of the Translation of the Saints

The doctrine of the translation of the saints has been often neglected in the discussion of the millennial question. It has been assumed that the Scriptural revelation of the translation of the saints has no vital bearing on the debate concerning the millennium. Allis, for instance, does not discuss the main passage of 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 at all in his attack on premillennialism.[1] Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*. Premillenarians have not always been aware of the strategic force of this revelation in support of the premillennial position either. Much of this neglect has accompanied a failure to realize the tremendous significance of this and other truths designated as mysteries in the New Testament.

*The content of the mystery of the translation.* In the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians the general subject of the resurrection of the human body is discussed. The resurrection of Christ and its certainty is presented first and the whole structure of Christian doctrine is seen to depend upon the resurrection of Christ. The necessity of resurrection of all men is then discussed in full, concluding in 1 Corinthians 15:50, "Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption."

The necessity having been shown for a change from a corruptible body to an incorruptible normally accomplished by resurrection, a dramatic new revelation is introduced: "Behold, I tell you a mystery: We all shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump; for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed (1 Cor 15:51-52).

This passage reveals that there are two possible ways by which a corruptible body can be transformed into an incorruptible: one way is by resurrection; the other is by translation. This latter truth is introduced as a "mystery." It should be clear to all careful students of the Word of God that it is not a mystery that saints who die will be raised again. The doctrine of resurrection is taught in both the Old and New Testaments and is not a hidden truth. Nor is it a mystery that there will be living saints on the earth at the time of the coming of the Lord. All passages dealing with the second advent as well as passages which speak of Christ coming for His church assume or state that saints will be on earth awaiting His coming. The precise mystery is the added revelation of the fact of translation without dying in connection with the coming of the Lord.

A common assumption of amillennialism is that living saints will be translated at the time of the second advent. There is seldom any facing of the significant fact that none of the Old Testament passages dealing with the second advent teach anything on the subject of the translation of the saints. In fact, the idea of a general translation is foreign to the Old Testament. The viewpoint of Old Testament prophecies is that saints on earth at the time of the second advent will enter the millennial kingdom *in the flesh*, an obvious contradiction of the idea of translation. This is clearly taught by the fact that saints will till the ground, raise crops, and have children born to them, all of which would be quite incredible for translated saints. It is safe to say that no passage in the Old or New Testament which is accepted by all parties as relating to the second advent of Christ at the end of the tribulation period ever speaks of translation of the saints. All passages dealing with translation concern the coming of Christ for His church which is distinguished from the second coming proper.

*Significance of the revelation.* It is surprising that the tremendous significance of the 1 Corinthians passage has been overlooked by so many scholars. As it relates to amillennialism, its main point is its contradiction of the amillennial interpretation of the second advent. Never in Scripture are the Old Testament saints or the saints of the future tribulation promised translation. The thought of translation is in fact a pure mystery, a truth not revealed at all in the Old Testament. It is peculiarly the hope of saints in the present age and is not extended anywhere in the Scripture to the saints who will live in the tribulation period.

The chief force of the passage, however, relates to the controversy between pretribulationists and posttribulationists who accept premillennialism in general. While this will be discussed later in relating premillennialism to the tribulation, it should be pointed out that any literal interpretation of this passage makes posttribulationism an impossibility. The normal premillennial position is that saints on earth at the second advent will enter the millennium and will be in the flesh, produce children, and have normal earthly experiences in contrast to resurrected or translated saints who will have spiritual bodies. It is obviously impossible to incorporate a translation of all saints at the end of the tribulation and the beginning of the millennium as it would result in all saints receiving a spiritual body, leaving none to populate the earth in the millennium. The fumbling of Scriptural revelation on this point by both amillenarians and premillenarians has only served to obscure the real issues in the millennial controversy.

A clear understanding of the mystery of the translation of the saints will serve, therefore, to support the premillennial position in general and the pretribulation interpretation in particular. It also substantiates the interpretation of a mystery as a truth revealed in the New Testament but ladden in the Old. hope of their reunion with their loved ones at the coming of the Lord, which they regarded as imminent. The nature of this comfort is also most illuminating. It is not simply the *fact* of resurrection, but the *time* of the resurrection. They apparently knew that a period of trouble was predicted for the earth. They expected the Lord to return at any time before this trouble would begin. Their comfort was that their loved ones would be resurrected at the same time as their translation, not at some later resurrection such as might precede the establishment of the kingdom on earth. Their comfort was based, then, on the hope of the imminency of the coming of the Lord and the expectation that this would also result in reunion with loved ones who had fallen asleep in Christ. The nature of their expectation distinguishes it from the second coming of Christ to the earth and supports the distinction between the translation of the church and the events related to the second advent.

## The Mystery of the Bride

In connection with a series of exhortations in Ephesians 5, the proper relationship of husbands to wives is illustrated by the relationship of Christ to the church. It is revealed that Christ “loved the church, and gave himself up for it” (Eph 5:25). The purpose of His sacrifice is “that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:26-27). Upon the ground of this illustration, husbands are exhorted to love their wives. The statement is made, “Even so ought husbands also to love their own wives as their own bodies” (Eph 5:28). It is declared to be a most natural thing to love one’s own body as further illustrated in the love of Christ for the church, “because we are members of his body” (Eph 5:30). The marriage union results in man and wife becoming “one flesh” (Eph 5:31). As applied to the church, it is then affirmed, “This mystery is great: but I speak in regard of Christ and of the church” (Eph 5:32). Book of Hosea is devoted to a historical allegory of this relationship. Israel is pictured as an untrue wife to be restored in millennial days. It should be borne in mind that this is a figure and not an actual marriage. By contrast the church in figure is described as a pure virgin being prepared for future marriage. In view of the Old Testament relationship, in what sense is the relationship of Christ to the church a mystery?

The mystery is not explained in Ephesians 5. The mystery is certainly not the sacrament of marriage—the Roman Church translates the verse: “This is a great sacrament” (Eph 5:32, Douay Version), an obvious error carried over from the Vulgate. [4] Even Catholic writers admit this. Cf. Jamieson, Fausset, Brown, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments*, VI, 419. It is rather the concept of mystery as elsewhere in the New Testament—a truth hitherto not revealed but now made known. The reference in this passage is to the union between Christ and the church composed of Gentile and Jewish believers in the present age. Such a union is never contemplated in the Old Testament. The

thought of the body of Christ as the church is a New Testament revelation as well as a New Testament work of God. While Israel as a nation was joined to God in a spiritual union, the new entity of the body of Christ in this age is never contemplated in such a relationship. It is therefore a revelation of the union of love binding Christ and the church in addition to the union of life indicated in the figure of the one body.

The various mystery aspects of the church combine to form a united testimony. The features therein revealed are foreign to divine revelation given in the Old Testament. They are related to the church as a distinct entity in the present age. They mark out the church as a separate purpose of God to be consummated before the resumption of the divine program for Israel.

Premillennialism is therefore related to the church primarily in maintaining the distinctions between the church and Israel which are so confused by the amillenarians and at the same time distinguishing the purpose of God for the present age from other ages past or future. This form of interpretation provides a literal and natural exegesis of the key passages which is honoring to the Word of God and furnishing an intelligent understanding of the program of God in past, present, and future ages.

Dallas, Texas

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 22

### Part 22: Premillennialism and the Tribulation

In the memorable Olivet Discourse, our Lord Jesus Christ answered the searching question of His disciples, “What shall be the sign of thy coming and of the end of the world?” (Matt 24:3). The major event predicted by the Lord as a sign of the second advent was the great tribulation. He urged those living in Palestine in that day “to flee unto the mountains” (Matt 24:16). He exhorted them, “Let him that is on the housetop not go down to take out the things that are in his house: and let him that is in the field not return back to take his cloak. But woe unto them that are with child and to them that give suck in those days! And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on a sabbath: for then shall be great tribulation, such as hath not been from the beginning of the world unto now, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days had been shortened, no flesh would have been saved: but for the elect’s sake those days shall be shortened” (Matt 24:17-22).

For those anticipating eagerly the coming advent of Christ, these words are fraught with tremendous meaning. Does there lie between us and the consummation of the age this awful period of trial? Must the church remain on earth through the great tribulation?

### The Tribulation a Major Problem of Eschatology

While Eschatology is at present enjoying revived interest among liberal theologians, the trend among conservatives seems to be to minimize its importance. It is frequently argued that in a day when the authority of the Bible as a whole is being disputed there is little profit in debating the fine points of Eschatology. If this is the case, an inquiry into the relationship of the tribulation to premillennialism is wasted effort. The question of whether the church must continue on earth through the predicted time of trouble, however, is neither trivial nor academic. It can be demonstrated that the issue is fraught with tremendous practical and doctrinal implications. While not as far-reaching in Biblical interpretation as premillennialism as a whole, the decision concerning the character of the tribulation is important to any detailed program of the future and is significant in its application of principles of interpretation far beyond the doctrine itself.

*Importance of the doctrine of the tribulation.* There are at least three reasons why the relationship of the tribulation to the coming of the Lord is important. It is first of all an *exegetical* problem. The many passages in the Old and New Testament, including the major part of the Book of Revelation, require an intelligent exegesis. The problem of the interpretation of the tribulation cannot be left in the area of suspended judgment without leaving these passages without exposition.

Second, it is a *theological* problem. It can be demonstrated that the interpretation given to the tribulation is integral to particular theological points of view, especially in the area of Eschatology. Questions such as the use of the literal method of interpretation as opposed to the nonliteral or spiritualizing method, the separation of divine programs for Israel and the church, and the larger issue of amillennialism versus premillennialism combine to make the doctrine significant beyond its own borders. To some extent the interpretation of the tribulation is predetermined by decision in other aspects of Eschatology.

Third, the doctrine is one of *practical* importance. If the church is destined to endure the persecutions of the tribulation, it is futile to hold the coming of the Lord before it as an imminent hope. Instead, it should be recognized that Christ cannot come until these predicted sorrows have been accomplished. On the other hand, if Christ will come for His church before the predicted time of trouble, Christians can regard His coming as an imminent, daily expectation. From a practical standpoint,

the doctrine has tremendous implications.

*Postmillennial attitude toward the tribulation.* While there is a wide variety of interpretation of the doctrine of the tribulation, each form of millennial teaching can be broadly characterized by its own position on the tribulation. In the postmillennial point of view, as illustrated in the writings of Charles Hodge, the tribulation is viewed as a final state of trouble just preceding the grand climax of the triumph of the gospel. The national conversion of Israel and the national conversion of Gentiles is viewed as containing in its last stages a final conflict with Antichrist, which is equated with Romanism.[1] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, III, 812-36.

It is characteristic of postmillennialism that it does not attempt a literal interpretation of the tribulation. Some less conservative than Hodge, such as Snowden, regard the tribulation as any time of trouble, now largely past or associated with the apostolic period. Hodge himself does not offer any specific system of interpretation, as illustrated in his comment on the Book of Revelation: "Some regard it as a description in oriental imagery of contemporaneous events; others as intended to set forth the different phases of the spiritual life of the Church; others as designed to unfold the leading events in the history of the Church and of the world in their chronological order; others again assume that it is a series, figuratively speaking, of circles; each vision or series of visions relating to the same events under different aspects; the end, and the preparation for the end, being presented over and over again; the great theme being the coming of the Lord, and the triumph of his Church." [2] *Ibid.*, III, 826.

While vague as to specific teaching, the postmillennial interpretation of the tribulation is clear, however, in its general characteristics. The tribulation is a time of trouble just preceding the second advent of Christ. The tribulation, however, is not very definite and its character is not sufficiently serious to interfere with the onward march of the church to a great climax of triumph at the second advent of Christ. The tribulation is a minor phase of the closing events of the age.

*Amillennial attitude toward the tribulation.* The amillennial interpretation of the tribulation does not differ essentially from the postmillennial although it has a different theological context. In Augustinian amillennialism, the present age is regarded as the predicted millennium, and inasmuch as the tribulation is said to precede the millennium, by so much it must already be past. Often it is identified with the troubles of Israel in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

The fact that the Book of Revelation was written after this event, however, and that a time of trouble is predicted to precede the second advent, has led some like Berkhof to hold to a future tribulation, placing the fulfillment of Scripture dealing with the tribulation, to which is added the battle of Gog and Magog, after the millennium. Berkhof writes: "The words of Jesus [Olivet Discourse] undoubtedly found a partial fulfillment in the days preceding the destruction of Jerusalem, but will evidently have a further fulfillment in the future in a tribulation far surpassing anything that has ever been experienced, Matt 24:21; Mark 13:19." [3] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 700.

The amillennial view, therefore, holds to a future tribulation period, but there is little uniformity concerning its exact character. The tendency in amillennialism is to avoid specific details in describing the tribulation. In effect, while admitting the fact of the coming tribulation amillenarians spiritualize the sequence of events which are prophesied. This is particularly true in the interpretation of the tribulation section of the Book of Revelation.

*Premillennial attitude toward the tribulation.* In general premillenarians interpret the coming tribulation with more literalness than either the amillenarians or postmillenarians. Within the ranks of premillenarians, however, there are three main types of interpretation. Some premillenarians hold the view that the coming of Christ for His church will be posttributational, that is, that the church will remain on earth throughout the tribulation period.

In recent years there has arisen a modification of this, known as the midtributational view, which holds that the church will be translated at a coming of the Lord for His church just before the great tribulation prophesied by our Lord, but in the middle of the seven-year period predicted by Daniel as preceding the coming of Christ (Dan 9:27). This view is rather recent and as yet has a limited literature.

The third view, which is very popular with premillennialists who have specialized in prophetic study, is the pretribulationist position, which holds that Christ will come for His church before the entire seven-year period predicted by Daniel. The church in this point of view does not enter at all into the final tribulation period. This teaching was espoused by Darby and the Plymouth Brethren and popularized by the famous *Scofield Reference Bible*. Generally speaking, the pretribulationist position is followed by those who consider premillennialism a *system* of Bible interpretation, while the posttribulationist and midtribulationist positions characterize those who limit the area of premillennialism to Eschatology.

An offshoot of pretribulationism, though seldom recognized as an orthodox point of view, is the partial rapture concept that only the godly Christians expecting the return of Christ will be translated before the tribulation, the rest continuing through it until the return of Christ to establish His earthly kingdom. It is obvious that only one of these four possible positions is correct, and it is the duty of the Biblical exegete to determine which is the proper interpretation of related Scriptures. It is the plan of the following treatment to deal with the pretribulationist position, including a refutation of the partial rapture concept, then to consider the posttribulationist view, and finally the midtribulationist position. That the followers of Darby “sought to overthrow what, since the Apostolic Age, have been considered by all pre-millennialists as established results.”[5] *Loc. cit.*

It must be conceded that the advanced and detailed theology of pretribulationism is not found in the Fathers, but neither is any other detailed and “established” exposition of premillennialism. The development of most important doctrines took centuries. If the doctrine of the Trinity did not receive permanent statement until the fourth century and thereafter, beginning with the Council of Nicea in 325, and if the doctrine of human depravity was not a settled doctrine of the church until the fifth century and after, and if such doctrines as the sufficiency of Scripture and the priesthood of the believer were not recognized until the Protestant Reformation, it is not to be wondered at that details of Eschatology, always difficult, should unfold slowly. It is certainly an unwarranted generalization to postulate a detailed and systematic premillennialism as in existence from the Apostolic Age.

The central feature of pretribulationism, the doctrine of imminency, is, however, a prominent feature of the doctrine of the early church. Without facing all the problems which the doctrine of imminency raises, such as its relation to the tribulation, the early church lived in constant expectation of the coming of the Lord for His church. According to Moffat, it was the widespread Jewish belief that some would be exempt from the tribulation.[6] *Cf. Expositor's Greek Testament*, s.v., Rev 3:10. “Rabbinic piety (Sanh. 98b) expected exemption from the tribulation of the latter days only for those who were absorbed in good works and in sacred studies.” For this citation and others which follow, *cf.* H. C. Thiessen, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, April-June, 1935, pp. 187-96. Clement of Rome (first century) wrote, “Of a truth, soon and suddenly shall His will be accomplished, as the Scriptures also bear witness, saying, ‘Speedily will he come, and will not tarry;’ and, ‘The Lord shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Holy One, for whom ye look.’”[7] *1 Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, chapter 23.

The Didache (120 A.D.) contains the exhortation, “Watch for your life’s sake. Let not your lamps be quenched, nor your loins unloosed; but be ye ready, for ye know not the hour in which our Lord cometh.”[8] *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, VII, 382. It should be clear from this quotation that the coming of the Lord is considered as possible in any hour, certainly an explicit reference to the imminency of the Lord’s return.

A similar reference is found in the “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles” (Book VII, Sec. ii, xxxi): “Observe all things that are commanded you by the Lord. Be watchful for your life. ‘Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning, and ye like unto men who wait for their Lord, when He will come, at even, or in the morning, or at cock-crowing, or at midnight. For what hour they think not, the Lord will come; and if they open to Him, blessed are those servants, because they were found watching....’”[9] *Ibid.*, VII, 471. Here again is the doctrine of imminency taught without apology.

It should be clear to any discerning student of prophecy that this expectancy of the early return of the Lord was not always coupled with a systematic structure of Eschatology as a whole. The problems were frequently left unresolved. To say, however, that the doctrine of imminency, which is the heart of pretribulationism, is a new and unheard of doctrine is, to say the least, an overstatement. While the teachings of the Fathers are not clear on details, it is certainly beyond dispute that they regarded the coming of the Lord as a matter of daily expectancy. It is entirely unwarranted to assume as the posttribulationists do that the early church regarded the imminent coming of the Lord as an impossibility and that their

expectation was the great tribulation first, then the coming of the Lord. If pretribulationism was unknown, in the same sense modern posttribulationism was also unknown. The charge that pretribulationism is a new and novel doctrine is false; that it has been developed and defined to a large extent in recent centuries is true. In any event, the thesis that the early Fathers were omniscient and once-for-all defined every phase of theology is an unjustified limitation on the liberty of the Spirit of God to reveal the truth of Scripture to each generation of believers. The history of the doctrine of the church has always to this hour revealed progress in other areas, and it is to be expected that this will continue also in Eschatology.

*The hermeneutical argument.* It is generally agreed by all parties that one of the major differences between amillennialism and premillennialism lies in the use of the literal method of interpretation. Amillennarians, while admitting the need for literal interpretation of Scripture in general, have held from Augustine to the present time that prophecy is a special case requiring spiritualizing or nonliteral interpretation. Premillennarians hold, on the contrary, that the literal method applies to prophecy as well as other doctrinal areas, and therefore contend for a literal millennium.

In a somewhat less degree the same hermeneutical difference is seen in the pretribulationist versus the posttribulationist positions. Pretribulationism is based upon a literal interpretation of key Scriptures, while posttribulationism tends toward spiritualization of the tribulation passages. This is seen principally in two aspects.

Posttribulationists usually ignore the distinction between Israel and the church much in the fashion of the amillennial school. The reason for this is that none of the tribulation passages in either the Old or New Testament ever mention the “church” or the *ecclesia*. In order to prove that the church is in the tribulation period, it is necessary to identify key terms as equivalent to the church. Hence, Israel becomes a general name for the church and in some contexts becomes an equivalent term. The term *elect* becomes a general designation for the saints of all ages, regardless of limitation of the context. Saints of all dispensations are considered as members of the true church. In order to make these various terms equivalents, it is necessary to take Scripture in other than a literal sense in many instances—the use of Israel as equivalent to the church being an illustration. The proof that the church is in the tribulation requires a theological system which spiritualizes many of its terms, and posttribulationists brush off a more literal interpretation as too trivial to answer. through the Tribulation without being compelled to feel the full force of it, even as the Israelites went through the plague-period in Egypt? ...The way of escape might take the form of a partial exemption from suffering...”[12] McPherson, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23. Reese has a different slant on the same subject by declaring that “immediately before the Day of the Lord falls, God can call His saints to Himself, without the necessity of an additional advent a generation earlier.”[13] Reese, *op. cit.*, p. 212. He goes on to explain, “That is, the righteous shall first be removed and then the judgment shall fall.”[14] *Ibid.*, p. 213. In effect, Reese is denying that judgments will fall until the close of the tribulation when the Lord comes. Practically speaking, he denies that the tribulation will be a time of tribulation. For Reese the wrath does not begin at Revelation 6:13 but in Revelation 19. By such sophistry the teaching that the church will go through the tribulation but without tribulation is preserved. Of importance here, however, is the illustration of the principle of interpretation used by the posttribulationists—the avoidance of the literal interpretation of the major passage, the Book of Revelation.

The choice of a weakened tribulation is not an accident, however, but necessary to their position. Only by this device can passages picturing the hope of the Lord’s return as a comfort and joy be sustained. It is impossible to harmonize a literal interpretation of the tribulation with posttribulationism. It would nullify not only the promises of comfort, but also the imminency and practical application of the doctrine of the Lord’s coming. The controversy between pretribulationists and posttribulationists is, in miniature, a replica of the larger controversy of premillennialism and amillennialism as far as principles of interpretation are concerned. This is brought out more in detail in the Scriptural revelation of the tribulation itself to which we now turn.

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 23

### Part 23: Premillennialism and the Tribulation

#### Pretribulationism (Continued)

*Argument from the nature of the tribulation.* Just as premillennialism is founded upon a literal interpretation of millennial passages, so pretribulationism is based upon a literal interpretation of the tribulation passages. A careful and literal exegesis of the Scriptures dealing with the tribulation reveal no evidence whatever that the church of the redeemed of the present age will go through the tribulation. This is brought out particularly in the Scriptural revelation of the nature of the tribulation.

Before ascertaining whether the church will pass through the tribulation, it is of utmost importance to understand first what the Scriptures teach about this coming period. Practically all types of posttribulationism are built upon confusion of tribulation in general, which characterizes various ages, and the great tribulation, which is the predicted future time. For instance, George H. Fromow answers the question of whether the church will pass through the great tribulation by countering: “The Church is *already* passing through ‘the Great Tribulation,’ according to the sense of Rev vii, vv. 13, 14 ... Rev vii . is the only passage where we find the Tribulation called ‘great.’ Its use as embracing the whole of the Church’s course, corresponds with the entire record of the Scriptural history of the redeemed. ‘Great’ thus covers the entire period of the history of the redeemed people of God, of ‘Saints,’ or ‘Gracious Ones,’ or ‘Church,’ however they may be described.”[1] George H. Fromow, *Will the Church Pass through the Tribulation?*, pp. 2-3. This quotation is notable because it illustrates two leading characteristics of posttribulationism which are essential to their conclusions: (1) confusion of the great tribulation with tribulation in general; (2) confusion of the church with saints as a whole. While posttribulationists sometimes avoid the first, they seldom avoid the second. As a study of the tribulation will bring out, “...not one syllable of Scripture affirms that the church goes through the great tribulation, or even enters that awful period.”[2] C. I. Scofield, *Will the Church Pass through the Great Tribulation?*, p. 10.

The Old Testament reveals that the tribulation deals with (1) the nation Israel; (2) the pagan Gentile political powers; (3) saints who are described as either Israelites or Gentiles. It is certain that the true church cannot be equated with the Gentile political powers, though the apostate church of the tribulation period is under the control of the political ruler of that time. Only by spiritualization, characteristic of amillennialism, can the nation Israel be considered the same as the church. The Old Testament revelation which specifies the judgment of Israel and the Gentile powers as the objective of the tribulation period by so much declares that the tribulation does not concern itself with the church, the body of believers in this present age. The fact that saints are mentioned proves only that there will arise in that period some who believe and are saved. A survey of tribulation passages will demonstrate these facts.

One of the first references to the tribulation is found in Deuteronomy 4:29-30: “But from thence ye shall seek Jehovah thy God, and thou shalt find him, when thou searchest after him with all thy heart and with all thy soul. When thou art in tribulation, and all these things are come upon thee, in the latter days thou shalt return to Jehovah thy God, and hearken unto his voice.” The tribulation here is revealed as preparatory for the restoration of the nation Israel, and therefore the preparation of Israel for the coming kingdom is an outstanding aspect of the period.

Another important Old Testament reference dealing with the tribulation is found in Jeremiah 30:4-11. In this passage the tribulation is declared to be “the time of Jacob’s trouble” (v. 7) and as unprecedented in its severity (cf. Matt 24:21). The revelation continues, however, with the glad announcement, “he shall be saved out of it” (v. 7). The Gentiles are described

as being judged and Israel is delivered from her oppressors. Jehovah is to be the God of Jacob and David is to be raised up to be their king (v. 9 ). Israel will be regathered from near and far and shall return to the land (v. 10 ). The destiny of Israel and the nations is contrasted in these words: “For I am with thee, saith Jehovah, to save thee: for I will make a full end of all the nations whither I have scattered thee, but I will not make a full end of thee; but I will correct thee in measure, and will in no wise leave thee unpunished” (v. 11 ). Again in this passage, both Jews and Gentiles are declared to be the objects of divine dealings in the tribulation, but the church, composed of true believers, is not in view at all.

Daniel supplies much material on the tribulation which falls into the same pattern. The seventieth “week” of Daniel,[3] For a good discussion of the future character of the seventieth week, see Robert D. Culver, *Daniel and the Latter Days*, pp. 135-60. the latter part of which is the time of great tribulation, describes the coming of the “one that maketh desolate”—the evil world-ruler of the great tribulation (Dan 9:27). The period is concerned with “thy people” (Dan 9:24) which can be no other than the Jewish people in this context. In Daniel 12:1, “a time of trouble” for “the children of thy people” is described. Like Jeremiah 30:7, this period is declared to be “such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time” (Dan 12:1). It is declared to culminate in deliverance: “and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book” (Dan 12:1). The reference to “thy people” is clearly a reference to the Jewish nation which shall be delivered at the end of the tribulation period.

None of the Old Testament passages nor any of the multiplied references in the Minor Prophets includes the church of the present age in its foreview of the tribulation. It is universally presented as dealing with the nation Israel and with the Gentile nations. Only by unwarranted identification of the church with Israel and by ignoring the context can the church be drawn into the picture.

What is true of passages in the Old Testament dealing with the tribulation is also true of the New Testament. Posttribulationists tend to slide over the obvious fact that the church is never once mentioned in the New Testament as being in the tribulation period. A notable passage is Matthew 24:15-31, the context of which is definitely Jewish. The sign given is the abomination of desolation connected with desecration of the Jewish temple of that time. Instructions are given to those in Judea to flee to the mountains—another indication that Israelites are in view. Reference is made to the Sabbath, a Jewish institution (Matt 24:20) and they are told to pray that their flight be not on the Sabbath—a day in which their flight would be very obvious.

Posttribulationists, while conceding that there is no reference to the church as such, seize upon the word “elect” found in Matthew 24:22, 31. Pretribulationists concede and uniformly teach that there will be elect, that is, saved people in the tribulation time. This fact does not in the slightest prove that these mentioned in this way belong to the church, the body of Christ. All saved people of all ages as individuals are elect. Israel is also an elect nation, that is, specially chosen to fulfill divine purposes. The question is not whether there are any elect in the tribulation, but whether that portion of the elect which is called the church, the body of Christ, is ever found. As far as this passage is concerned, there is no evidence whatever for the presence of the church in this period. heaven” (Mark 13:27). The point is that pretribulationism is not hindered in the slightest by the form of expression that is used here, and posttribulationists are guilty of begging the question by assuming that this passage confirms their position. The fact is that the church is not mentioned at all in this passage by any distinctive title such as the word *church* or the term *body of Christ*, or any other term peculiarly a reference to the church. It is not claimed that this passage proves pretribulationism, but it is fair to claim that it does not offer any evidence whatever against it.

The argument of Reese that the gathering of the elect is positive proof that the translation of the saints takes place at this time is another instance of reading into the passage what it does not say. Reese states: “The assertion of Kelly’s in his *Second Coming* (p. 211) that there is no rapture at Matt. xxiv.31 , is as bold as it is unfounded. Our Lord in that passage gave a perfect picture of the assembling of the saved of this Dispensation by means of a rapture; St. Mark even used for ‘gather’ the verbal form of the same word used for ‘gathering’ in 2 Thess. ii.1 , where Paul refers to the Rapture. To unbiased minds the gathering of the saved, or the Elect, in Matt. xxiv.31 , is the prototype of Paul’s teaching in 1 Thess. iv.16-17 , and 2 Thess. ii.1 .”[6] *Ibid.*, p. 208. The logical fallacy of this statement should be apparent. Reese argues because there is a gathering at the translation that therefore every mention of a gathering must be the same event. The truth is that there will be a gathering of the church, the body of Christ, at the translation, before the tribulation. There will also be a gathering after the

tribulation which will be more inclusive. Matthew says nothing about a translation and the idea of translation is foreign to any passage dealing with the coming of Christ to establish His kingdom. There will be no translation then, though there will be a resurrection of righteous dead. Matthew says nothing about the resurrection either. It should be clear that Matthew's revelation deals with the gathering of the elect as an event subsequent to all that has gone before.

The major Scriptural passage on the tribulation period is the Book of Revelation, chapters 4-19. Here in fifteen chapters in the most graphic language possible the great catastrophic time of trouble is unfolded. Any reasonably literal interpretation of this portion of Scripture will sustain the point of view that the events herein described have never been fulfilled and comprise the awful period of human history still ahead which will culminate in the "revelation of Jesus Christ," the second advent proper. It should be borne in mind that the Book of Revelation deals with the revelation of Jesus Christ to an unbelieving world as its God and Judge. The description of the tribulation time is the fitting frame to the picture, giving the events preceding the climactic day of the Lord.

It is notable that in this extended portion of Scripture there is not one mention of the church, the body of Christ. After the message to the seven churches in Asia, obviously contemporary to the first century, not one reference is found to the church or any other title peculiar to believers of this present age. To be sure, saints are mentioned both in heaven and on earth, but this general reference is not a hindrance to the pretribulationist position. The church is also in view in the figure of marriage in Revelation 19 picturing the coming of the wife of the Lamb, but this is in connection with the second advent and does not constitute any problem. Like passages previously considered, the Book of Revelation presents the tribulation as having the divine purpose of purging the nation Israel and bringing them to repentance and of judging and destroying the Gentile political power of that day. The entire program as revealed in the Book of Revelation is without relevance to the present purpose of God of forming a body of believers from Jews and Gentiles to constitute the bride of Christ.

It is, of course, conceded that there are many passages which teach that even the church will have a measure of tribulation while on earth. Christ told His disciples plainly, "In the world ye shall have tribulation" (John 16:33). Paul preached "that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22; cf. 2 Tim 3:12). This is taken as proving beyond question that the church will go through the future tribulation by some posttribulationists.[7] George L. Rose, *Tribulation Till Translation*, pp. 76-77. It illustrates the illogical thinking which confuses Scriptural teaching on tribulation in general which abides through the age with the future distinctive period of tribulation declared to be unprecedented. The same passage cannot refer to both. The great tribulation is always presented in Scripture as a future time of trouble while the state of difficulty and persecution experienced by the early church was clearly contemporary. Posttribulationism has not proved anything until it has proved that the church, the body of Christ, will be in that prophesied period of unprecedented trouble. This is, however, impossible, as none of the passages which deal with this tribulation period mention the church.

Not only is there no mention of the church in any passage describing the future tribulation, but there are specific promises given to the church that deliverance from that period is assured. According to 1 Thessalonians 5:9, Christians are promised, "For God appointed us not unto wrath, but unto the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." The wrath of God will be poured out upon the world during the great tribulation. Revelation 6:17 states, "For the great day of their wrath is come; and who is able to stand?" The character of the judgments which will fall is such that they will affect everyone—famine, pestilence, sword, earthquake, stars falling from heaven. The only way one could be kept from that day of wrath would be to be delivered beforehand. The same context in 1 Thessalonians 5 also affirms that the believer will not be overtaken by the day of destruction like a thief in the night and that the believer is not to be included with the children of darkness who are doomed for destruction. Instead of being appointed to wrath and sudden destruction as children of darkness, believers are declared to be appointed to salvation and to living together with Him.

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 speaks in similar vein. Jesus is declared to be the one "who delivered us from the wrath to come." The possibility of escaping the coming day of trial is predicted in Luke 21:36: "But watch ye at every season, making supplication, that ye may prevail to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man."

The church at Philadelphia is promised: "Because thou didst keep the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon the earth" (Rev 3:10). As the

translators have made clear, the thought of the Greek is to “keep from,” not to “keep in.” The promise was to be kept from “the hour” of trial, not just the trials in the hour. The primary promise to the church of Philadelphia was that they would not enter this hour of trial. Historically, it meant just that. The church at Philadelphia was not to enter the tribulation period. By application, if expositors are correct who find in the seven churches a foreshadowing of the entire church age, then the Philadelphia church, representing the true and faithful church, is promised deliverance before the hour comes. While it may be debatable to what extent this constitutes absolute proof for pretribulationism, it gives no comfort whatever to posttribulationism.[8] For further discussion, cf. E. Schuyler English, *Re-Thinking the Rapture*, pp. 85-91.

The Scriptures repeatedly indicate that Christians of this age are kept from wrath. Romans 5:9 states: “Much more then, being now justified by his blood, shall we be saved from the wrath of God through him.” This principle is illustrated in Scripture in such historic cases as the deliverance of Lot from Sodom, which is taken as a specific illustration of deliverance from wrath in 2 Peter 2:6-9. Noah and his family, delivered from the flood by the ark, constitute another illustration of the principle. Rahab at Jericho was also delivered from the doomed city. While illustrations cannot properly be taken as absolute proof, they support the idea that God characteristically delivers believers from wrath designed for judgment upon the unbelievers. If God delivers the church before the time of tribulation, it will be in keeping with the general principle.

The nature of the tribulation as revealed in Scripture constitutes, therefore, an important argument supporting the teaching that the church will not go through the tribulation. It has been shown that a literal interpretation of the tribulation does not produce any evidence that the church will be in this period. Important passages such as Deuteronomy 4:29-30; Jeremiah 30:4-11; Daniel 9:24-27; 12:1 ; Matthew 24:15-31; Revelation 4-19 ; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; 5:4-9 do not indicate that the church will be in the tribulation period. It has been shown that the purpose of the tribulation is to purge and judge Israel and to punish and destroy Gentile power. In neither aspect is the church the object of the events of the period. In addition to these general arguments, the Scriptures also indicate that the believer in this present age will be kept from the time of wrath (1 Thess 1:9-10; 5:4-10 ; 2 Pet 2:6-9; Rev 3:10). Taken as a whole, the study of the tribulation as revealed in Scripture does not afford any support to a posttribulational translation of the saints.

*Argument from the nature of the church versus the nature of Israel.* Much of the background for the differing points of view on pretribulationism as opposed to posttribulationism is found in different concepts of the church. While it is difficult to make an accurate generalization, usually those who sharply distinguish Israel and the church are both premillennial and pretribulational, while those who consider Israel and the church more or less the same concept, even if premillennial, tend to be posttribulational. The concept of the church as a distinct entity, peculiar to the present age since the Day of Pentecost, usually goes along with the idea that the church will be translated before the tribulation.

If the point of view is accepted that the church of the present age is distinctive, as argued in earlier discussion, it supports the idea that the church will not go through the tribulation. This is seen, first, in the nature of the professing church as compared to the nation of Israel. According to pretribulationism, at the time of the translation of the church all true believers are translated from earth to heaven, leaving only that portion of the professing church which was not genuinely saved. These professing but unsaved members of the organized church in the world continue on earth through the tribulation and form the nucleus of the ungodly, apostate church of the tribulation which becomes the state of religion of that time. In this sense only, the church goes through the tribulation. In like manner, the nation Israel enters the tribulation in an unsaved condition and proceeds through the purging experiences which culminate in the second advent and the separation of those in Israel who turn to Christ in that period from those who worship the Antichrist.

All points of view accept the conclusion that both Israel and the professing church go through the tribulation. The many Old Testament passages on the tribulation as well as the New Testament revelation make this clear and beyond dispute. Pretribulationism finds in these facts supporting evidence that the true church, the body of Christ, does not enter the tribulation by the very fact that the same Scriptures which frequently mention Israel and apostate Christendom never mention the true church as being in this period.

This is borne out by the contrast between the body of Christ and the professing church, both of which have a considerable body of Scripture describing their respective programs. The distinction between them, in a word, is the difference between

mere profession and reality, between outward conformity and vital regeneration. The professing church moves on to its complete state of apostasy and ends in awful judgment. The true church is caught up to heaven to be the bride of the Son of God. The presence of the apostate church in the tribulation is one of its principal characteristics. The presence of the true church is wholly unnecessary. The distinctions between the true church and the professing church justify the widest difference in program and destiny.

Likewise, there is a graphic difference between the true church and true or spiritual Israel. In the present age, all who are Israelites by natural birth upon receiving Christ as Savior become members of the church, the body of Christ. By so much they are cut off from the particular promises and program of Israel and instead partake of the new program of God for the church on the same basis as Gentile believers. In other words, all who are true or spiritual Israel in the present age by this very fact are members of the church. Immediately after the translation of the church, however, Israelites who turn to God and trust in Christ have the privilege of being saved as individuals even in the tribulation period. When saved in this period Israelites lose none of their national promises. Their hope is the second advent of Christ, the coming of Christ as King and Messiah. While saved on the same basis of the death of Christ as saints in the present age, their program for the future is entirely different. Those who are martyred will be raised at the second advent (Rev 20:4-6). Those who survive the persecutions of this period will enter the millennium and become the objects of divine favor and blessing according to the kingdom promises. The contrasts herein provided in the prophetic Word serve to distinguish the future of spiritual Israel in the present age from spiritual Israel in the tribulation. The distinctions are built upon the differences between the church in the present age from saints of all preceding or succeeding periods.

In a word, prior to Pentecost there was no church, though there were saints among both Jews and Gentiles, who, while retaining their national characteristics, were nevertheless true saints of God. After Pentecost and until the translation there is no body of believers among either Gentiles or Israel except as found in the true church. After the translation of the church, there are no true believers in the professing and apostate church, but believers in that tribulation period retain their national characteristics as saved Gentiles or saved Jews. Never are tribulation saints given the special and peculiar promises given to the church in the present age. The nature of the church in contrast to Israel therefore becomes an argument supporting the pretribulation viewpoint. While these arguments have only relative strength, when added to preceding arguments and supported by those to follow they constitute confirming evidence.

Dallas, Texas

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 24

### Part 24: Pretribulationism (continued)

*Argument from imminency of the return of Christ.* One of the precious promises left as a heritage to His disciples was the announcement of Christ in the Upper Room, “I come again.” The literalness of this passage, though often assailed, is obvious. Christ said: “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14:3). Just as literally as Christ went to heaven, so He will come again to receive His disciples to Himself and to take them to the Father’s house.

It is rather strange that the literal interpretation of this passage should be even questioned. It is perfectly obvious that that Christ’s departure from earth to heaven represented in the expression, “if I go,” was a literal departure. He went bodily from earth to heaven. By the same token, “I come again” should be taken as a literal and bodily return. While the present tense is used in the expression, “I come again,” its meaning is an emphatic future. The Authorized Version accordingly translates it, “I will come again.” A. T. Robertson describes it, “Futuristic present middle, definite promise of the second coming of Christ.”[1] A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, V, 249. As in English, a present tense is sometimes used in the Greek of a certain future event pictured as if already coming to pass. A similar instance is the word of Christ to Mary in John 20:17, “I ascend unto my Father and your Father, and my God and your God.” The present is used for an emphatic future action.

The revelation given in John 14 is to the point that the departure of Christ from earth to heaven is required in order to prepare a place for them in the Father’s house, used here as an expression equivalent to heaven. The promise to come again is connected with the return of Christ to heaven with the disciples. Christ is promising to take His disciples to the Father’s house when He comes again.

It should be carefully determined just what takes place at the time of the event here described: Christ returns to the earthly scene to take the disciples from earth to heaven. This is in absolute contrast to what takes place when Christ returns to establish His kingdom on earth. On that occasion, no one goes from earth to heaven. The saints in the millennial kingdom are on earth with Christ. The only interpretation that fits the statements of John 14 is to refer it to the time of the translation of the church. Then, indeed, the disciples will go from earth to heaven, to the place prepared in the Father’s house.

The idea of going to the Father’s house in heaven was quite foreign to the thinking of the disciples. Their hope was that Christ would immediately establish His kingdom on earth and that they would remain in the earthly sphere to reign with Him. The thought of going to heaven first was a new revelation, and one that apparently was not comprehended. In Acts 1:6 they were still asking about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. In making the pronouncement in John 14, Christ is holding before His disciples an entirely different hope than that which was promised to Israel as a nation. It is the hope of the church in contrast to the hope of the Jewish nation. The hope of the church is to be taken to heaven; the hope of Israel is Christ returning to reign over the earth.

The passage so clearly teaches that the disciples will go from earth to heaven that those who deny the pretribulation translation of the church are forced to spiritualize this passage and make the expression “I come again” a coming of Christ for each Christian at the time of his death. Marcus Dods states, “The promise is fulfilled in the death of the Christian, and it has changed the aspect of death.”[2] Marcus Dods, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, I, 822. It is certainly desperate exegesis to dream up not only a spiritualization of the term, “I come again,” but to postulate a personal coming of Christ at

the death of each saint, a teaching which is never found explicitly in the Scriptures. Dods himself admits this is strange doctrine when he adds weakly, “The personal second coming of Christ is not a frequent theme in this Gospel.”[3] *Loc. cit.*

The point is that a coming of Christ to individuals at death is not found in John’s Gospel at all, nor in any other Scripture. Here again is an illustration of the fact that spiritualization of Scripture goes hand in hand with denial of the pretribulation rapture. Certainly, the hope set before the disciples cannot be reduced to the formula, “When you die you will go to heaven.” This would not have been new truth. Rather, Christ is promising that when He comes He would take them to heaven where they would be forever with Him, without reference to death.

The ultimate objective of the return of Christ is that the disciples may be with Christ forever, “that where I am, there ye may be also.” It is true that saints who die are immediately taken to heaven as far as their immaterial nature is concerned. In Scripture, however, the hope of being with Christ is connected with the translation of the church as if the intermediate state is not a full realization of what it means to be with Christ. Hence in 1 Thessalonians both the living and the resurrected dead shall “be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thess 4:17-18). It is true, however, that the intermediate state is described as being “with Christ,” (Phil 1:23), and as being “at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8). Nevertheless, the full expression of fellowship with Christ and being with Him wherever He goes is conditioned on the resurrection of the body for the dead in Christ and the translation of the living saints.

The hope of the return of Christ to take the saints to heaven is presented in John 14 as an imminent hope. There is no teaching of any intervening event. The prospect of being taken to heaven at the coming of Christ is not qualified by description of any signs or prerequisite events. Here, as in other passages dealing with the coming of Christ for the church, the hope is presented as an imminent event. On this basis, the disciples are exhorted not to be troubled. If the teaching of Christ had been to the intent that His coming for them was after the great tribulation, it is difficult to see how this message would have been a source of solace to their troubled hearts. Contrast the message of Christ to those living in the tribulation to flee their persecutors (Matt 24:15-22).

Other exhortations in relation to the return of Christ for the church also lose much of their meaning if the doctrine of imminency is destroyed. It should be obvious that only flagrant spiritualization of the tribulation passages which predict the program of events during the tribulation period can possibly save the doctrine of imminency for the posttribulationist. If there are definite events of horrible suffering and persecution yet ahead before the return of Christ to establish His kingdom, in no sense can this coming be declared imminent. When Calvin anticipated the imminent coming of Christ, it was on the ground that the tribulation was already largely past—a deduction which depended upon spiritualization of the tribulation passages. Most posttribulationists today oppose the doctrine of imminency and regard the coming of Christ as approaching, but not immediate. For the most part, Scriptural evidence for imminency today is equivalent to proof of the pretribulation viewpoint.

In addition to the exhortation, “Let not your heart be troubled,” there is coupled with the doctrine of the coming of the Lord in John 14:1 the charge, “Wherefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Thess 4:18). The doctrine of the coming of the Lord was a comfort or encouragement to the Thessalonian Christians. This comfort was not merely that their loved ones would be raised from the dead, a doctrine with which they no doubt were already familiar, but the larger truth that they would be raised in the same event as Christians would be translated. This they had been taught as an imminent hope. In 1 Thessalonians 1:10, they are described as those who “wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivered us from the wrath to come.” Their hope was the coming of Christ and they had been delivered from all wrath to come, including the wrath of the future tribulation period. At the end of chapter 2 and chapter 3, there are renewed assurances of the hope of Christ’s return.

Most of the immediate significance of this hope would be lost if, as a matter of fact, the coming of Christ was impossible until they had passed through the tribulation period. In 1 Thessalonians 5:6, they are exhorted to “watch and be sober,” hardly a realistic command if the coming of Christ was greatly removed from their expectation. In 1 Corinthians 1:7, Paul speaks of the Corinthians as “waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ,” which is another mention of the coming of the Lord when He will be revealed in His glory to the church. In Titus 2:13, our future hope is described as “looking for the

blessed hope and appearing of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.” While the appearing of the glory of Christ to the world and to Israel will not be fulfilled until the second coming to establish the kingdom on earth, the church will see the glory of Christ when she meets Him in the air. This is the express teaching of 1 John 3:2: “but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (AV) Again, it is difficult to make realistic a command to “look” for the glory of Christ if, as a matter of fact, the event is separated from us by great trials and persecutions which in all probability would cause our destruction.

The passage in 1 John 3:1-3 adds the exhortation: “And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure” (1 John 3:3, AV). The hope of seeing Christ as He is and being like Him is a purifying hope. Again, the hope is realistic in proportion to its imminency. Housewives engage in special efforts of preparation when guests are expected momentarily, while the tendency would be unconcern if visitors were far removed. The teaching of the coming of the Lord for the church is always presented as an imminent event which should occupy the Christian’s thought and life to a large extent.

By contrast, the exhortation to those living in the tribulation is to look for signs first and then, after the signs, to look for the return of Christ to establish His kingdom. Accordingly, in the Olivet Discourse, describing the tribulation, they are exhorted to look for the sign of the abomination of desolation (Matt 24:15), and to anticipate the announcement of false Christs. Then, the exhortation to them is to “watch,” that is, after the signs have all appeared (Matt 24:42; 25:13). Watching for the return of the Lord to establish the kingdom is related to the preceding signs, while the exhortation to the church is without this context, and the coming of the Lord is regarded as an imminent event. The only concept which does justice to this attitude of expectation of the church is that of the imminent return of Christ. For all practical purposes, abandonment of the pretribulation return of Christ is tantamount to abandonment of the hope of His imminent return. If the Scriptures present the coming of the Lord for His church as imminent, by so much they also declare it as occurring before the predicted period of tribulation.

*Argument from the nature of the work of the Holy Spirit in this age.* In the Upper Room Discourse, our Lord predicted, among other important prophecies, the coming of the Holy Spirit. While the Holy Spirit had been immanent in the world and active in creation, providence, inspiration, and salvation, a new order of the Spirit was foretold. This truth is gathered up in the momentous declaration recorded in John 14:16-17: “And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth: whom the world cannot receive; for it beholdeth him not, neither knoweth him: ye know him; for he abideth with you, and shall be in you.” In the distinction made in the last phrase, “abideth with you, and shall be in you,” there is predicted the tremendous change to be effected at Pentecost. While formerly the Spirit was “with you,” thereafter He would be “in you.” The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit was to be one of the outstanding dispensational changes effected at Pentecost. While formerly the Spirit was with the saints and only in extraordinary cases indwelt them, now His indwelling all believers was to mark the wider extent of grace in the new age. The present age is the dispensation of the Spirit.

Just as Christ was omnipresent in the Old Testament, incarnate and present in the world in the Gospels, and returned to heaven in the Acts, so the Holy Spirit, after His period of ministry on the earth in the present age, will return to heaven. The chief proof text concerning the return of the Holy Spirit to heaven is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-8, in connection with the revelation of the coming lawless one, described as “the man of sin,” and “the son of perdition.” This character is usually identified with the coming Antichrist or world-ruler of the tribulation period. The passage of Scripture dealing with this subject states that the man of sin cannot be revealed until the restrainer is “taken out of the way.” But who is the restrainer?

Expositors of all classes have had a field day in attempting to identify this restrainer. Ellicott cites Schott as suggesting Paul himself.[4] Charles C. Ellicott, *A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians with a Revised Translation*, 122. As another suggestion, Ellicott refers to Wieseler who identifies it as a collection of the saints at Jerusalem.[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 122-23. Still more “plausible,” according to Ellicott, is that it refers to “the successor of Roman emperors,” which he traces to Wordsworth.[6] *Ibid.*, p. 123. His final suggestion, which he thinks is best, is that it is merely a “personification” of “what was previously expressed by the abstract to katecon.”[7] *Loc. cit.* that restraineth.” This is, however, easily explained. It may be the difference between the power of God in general as a restraining force in contrast with the person of the restrainer. Another possible explanation is that the change in gender is a recognition of the fact that

pneuma, the word *spirit* in Greek, is grammatically neuter but is sometimes regarded as a masculine in recognition of the fact that it refers to the person of the Holy Spirit. Hence in John 15:26 and 16:13-14 the masculine is deliberately used in reference to the Spirit. In Ephesians 1:13-14 the relative pronouns are used in the masculine.

The ultimate decision on the reference to the restrainer goes back to the larger question of who after all is capable of restraining sin to such an extent that the man of sin cannot be revealed until the restraint is removed. The doctrine of divine providence, the evidence of Scripture that the Spirit characteristically restrains and strives against sin (Gen 6:3), and the teaching of Scripture that the Spirit is resident in the world and indwelling the church in a special sense in this age combine to point to the Spirit of God as the only adequate answer to the problem of identification of the restrainer. The failure to identify the restrainer as the Holy Spirit is another indication of the inadequate understanding of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in general and His work in relation to the larger providential movements of God in human history.

If the Spirit be identified as the restrainer, a chronology is set up which unmistakably places the translation of the church before the tribulation. The passage teaches that the order of events is as follows: (1) the restrainer is now engaged in restraining sin; (2) the restrainer, will be taken away at a future point of time; (3) then the man of sin can be revealed. Inasmuch as the man of sin is identified with the world ruler, the “prince that shall come” of Daniel 9:26, it should be clear to students of prophecy that the restrainer must be taken away before the beginning of the last seven years of Daniel’s prophecy.

The very fact that the covenant will be made with the head of the revived Roman Empire will be an unmistakable token. A covenant involving the regathering of Israel to the land of Palestine and their protection from their foes could not be a secret covenant. Its very nature is a public matter requiring public declaration. A believer in Scripture would be able to identify the man of sin at once when this covenant is made. The chronology, therefore, requires the removal of the restrainer before the manifestation of the man of sin by the very act of forming the covenant with Israel.

It should also be evident that, if the Spirit of God characteristically indwells the church as well as the individual saint in this age, the removal of the Spirit would involve a dispensational change and the removal of the church as well. While the Spirit will work in the tribulation period, He will follow the pattern of the period before Pentecost rather than this present age of grace. The Spirit of God will return to heaven after accomplishing His earthly work much as the Lord Jesus Christ returned to heaven after completing His earthly work. In both cases, the work of the Second Person and the Third Person continues, but in a different setting and in a different way.

If, therefore, the restrainer of 2 Thessalonians 2 be identified as the Holy Spirit, another evidence is produced to indicate the translation of the church before the final tribulation period will begin on earth. While in the realm of debatable conclusions if left unsupported by other Scriptural evidence, it constitutes a confirmation of the teaching that the church will be translated before the tribulation.

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 25

### Part 25: Pretribulationism (continued)

*Argument from the necessity of an interval between the translation and the establishment of the millennial kingdom.* A careful study of related Scripture will demonstrate that an interval of time between the translation of the church and the coming of Christ to establish the millennial kingdom is absolutely necessary because certain events must take place in the intervening period. In general, the argument depends upon four lines of evidence: (1) intervening events in heaven; (2) intervening events on earth; (3) the nature of the judgment of the Gentiles; (4) the nature of the judgment of Israel.

(1) Intervening events in heaven. According to 2 Corinthians 5:10, all Christians will appear before a judgment seat of Christ to be judged according to their works: “For we must all be made manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ; that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad.”[1] All quotations from Scripture are from the American Standard Version (1901) unless otherwise stated. This judgment is not a general judgment—it relates to those described as “we all,” which the context would seem to limit to believers in Christ in the present age.[2] Cf. L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, IV, 404-6; E. S. English, *Re-thinking the Rapture*, pp. 81-84. The character of the judgment is that of reward. By comparing this Scripture with a companion passage in 1 Corinthians 3:14-15, it is clear that the issue is not punishment for sin but reward for good works: “If any man’s work shall abide which he hath built thereon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as through fire.” The distinguishing of good and bad works in 2 Corinthians 5 is for the purpose of determining reward.

The character of this judgment seems to set it apart from judgments occurring at the second advent. The rewards anticipated in this judgment are described as imminent in several Scriptures. In 1 Peter 5:4 it is revealed, “And when the chief Shepherd shall be manifested, ye shall receive the crown of glory that fadeth not away.” Again in Revelation 22:12, Christ declares, “Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me to render to each man according as his work is.”

While the time of the judgment is not explicit in any of the passages, certain other evidences seem to require this judgment as preceding and prerequisite to the second coming itself. If the four and twenty elders of Revelation 4:4 are interpreted as referring to the church—a disputed point—it would tend to confirm that judgment of the church has already taken place, as they are already crowned.[3] According to the Authorized Version of Revelation 5:9-10, the twenty-four elders are described as redeemed by the blood of Christ and made kings and priests. This would unmistakably identify them as saints and in all probability the church in particular. In the text adopted for translation in the American Standard Version and the Revised Standard Version, the “us” of verse 9 is removed, and the “us” of verse 10 is made “them.” This would make it possible to identify the elders as angels rather than men. Scholars are divided on the issue. Kelly declares the elders are the church. “They are clearly saints and at home in glory,” a conclusion which he states “few will deny” (*Lectures on the Book of Revelation*, p. 98). James Moffatt in the *Expositor’s Greek Testament* (V, 378) identifies the elders as angels and appeals to mythology for support. The interpretation ultimately rests on exegesis as the improved text leaves the question open. Many considerations would point to identification with the church. For further discussion cf. E. Schuyler English, *Re-thinking the Rapture*, pp. 92-98. A decisive evidence is found in Revelation 19:6-8 where the “wife” of the Lamb is declared to be arrayed “in fine linen, bright and pure: for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints” (Rev 19:8). The implication is evident that those who compose the “wife” are already translated or resurrected, and their righteous acts determined and rewarded. The marriage supper announced indicates that the marriage itself has already taken place. If the church is to be judged, rewarded, and joined to Christ in the symbol of marriage before the second advent, an interval of time is required.

(2) Intervening events on earth. If the premillennial interpretation of Scripture be assumed, it is evident that the tribulation period is a time of preparation for the millennium. Certain problems immediately arise if the church is not translated until the end of the tribulation. Nothing is more evident in the passage dealing with the translation of the church than the fact that every believer on that occasion is translated, that is, transformed from a body of flesh to an immortal body and caught up from the earth. The very act of translation also constitutes an absolute separation of all believers from all unbelievers. In a moment of time the greatest separation that could possibly be imagined takes place.

If the translation takes place *after* the tribulation, the question facing the posttribulationists is a very obvious one: Who is going to populate the earth during the millennium? The Scriptures are specific that, during the millennium, saints will build houses and bear children and have normal, mortal lives on earth. If all believers are translated and all unbelievers are put to death, there will be no one left to populate the earth and fulfill these Scriptures. While posttribulationism may satisfy the amillenarian who denies a future millennium, it presents a difficult problem to the premillenarian.

The Scriptures declare emphatically that life on earth in the millennium relates to a people not translated and not resurrected, a people still in the mortal bodies. Isaiah 65:20-25 states that there will be rejoicing in Jerusalem, a person dying at the age of one hundred years will be regarded as a child. It declares of the inhabitants: "They shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat: for as the days of a tree shall be the days of my people, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, nor bring forth for calamity; for they are the seed of the blessed of Jehovah, and their offspring with them" (Isa 65:21-23). The passage closes with a description of millennial conditions, "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith Jehovah" (Isa 65:25). Obviously, only a people in mortal flesh build houses, plant, work, and have offspring. The concluding chapter of Isaiah continues the same theme. There will be judgment upon the wicked but peace to Jerusalem like a river. The description is not of a people translated or resurrected, but a people purged and judged worthy, though still in the flesh, of entrance into the millennial earth.

The best answer to the problem of who will populate the millennial earth is an obvious one. If the church is translated before the tribulation period, there is ample time for a new generation of believers to come into being from Jew and Gentile background to qualify for entrance into the millennial kingdom at the second coming of Christ. The problem of populating the millennium is thereby quickly solved and many relating Scriptures are given a natural and literal interpretation. It is significant that Alexander Reese in his closely reasoned attack upon the pretribulation position[4] *The Approaching Advent of Christ*. finds it convenient to ignore this major objection to posttribulationism entirely. What is true of Reese is true also of other posttribulationists.[5] No answer is given to this argument and it is not mentioned in Fromow's *Triumph through Tribulation*. The posttribulation position leads logically to an abandonment of premillennialism altogether, or requires such spiritualization of the millennium until it becomes indistinguishable from an amillennial interpretation. Premillennialism demands an interval between the translation and the second coming to make possible a generation of believers who will enter the millennium.

This conclusion is confirmed by a study of the two major judgments which take place in connection with the establishment of the kingdom, which are related to the entire human race: (1) the judgment of Israel (Ezek 20:34-38), and (2) the judgment of the Gentiles (Matt 25:31-46). These judgments deal with the living Gentiles and Israelites who are on the earth at the time of the second advent.

According to Ezekiel 20:34-38, at the time of the second advent a regathering of Israel is brought about. It obviously takes considerable time—many weeks, if not months—to effect, but it is carried out precisely as the prophets indicate. Isaiah states that every means of transportation is pressed into use: "They shall bring all your brethren out of all the nations for an oblation unto Jehovah, upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters and upon mules, and upon dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, saith Jehovah..." (Isa 66:20). That the regathering is to be complete to the last man—obviously not fulfilled by previous regathering—is declared in Ezekiel 39:25-29. It is explicitly stated, "I have gathered them unto their own land, and have left none of them any more there," *i.e.*, among the nations (Ezek 39:28).

The regathering process completed, a judgment of Israel is described in Ezekiel 20:34-38. God declares: "I will cause you to

pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant; and I will purge out from among you the rebels, and them that transgress against me...they shall not enter into the land of Israel..." (Ezek 20:37-38).

In the light of the details of this judgment, it should be clear to any impartial observer that the judgment deals with Israelites still in the flesh, not translated or resurrected. Further, the process takes time because of the geographic regathering that is involved. It is an event related to the establishment of the millennial kingdom but is subsequent by some weeks or months to the actual second advent. It relates to Israel racially alone and includes both believers and unbelievers. The judgment consists in putting to death all the rebels or unbelievers, leaving only the believers to enter the promised land.

This multitude of details sets this judgment apart from the translation of the church as much as any two events could be distinguished. The translation takes place in a moment. The translation relates only to believers, and it leaves unbelievers exactly as they were before. The translation of the church has no relation to promises of the land of Israel. The Ezekiel judgment has the promises of possession of the promised land as a primary objective—determining those qualified for entrance. The translation of the church is followed by arrival in heaven. The believers of Ezekiel 20 enter the land, not heaven, in bodies of flesh, not immortal bodies. The translation concerns Jewish and Gentile believers alike. This judgment has to do only with Israel.

It should be further evident that, if the translation of the church took place simultaneously with the second advent to establish the kingdom, the Ezekiel judgment would be both impossible and unnecessary as the separation of believers from unbelievers would have already taken place. It may therefore be concluded from the nature of the judgment of Israel that an interval is required between the translation of the church and the judgment of Israel during which a new generation of Israelites who believe in Christ as Savior and Messiah comes into being and who are waiting for His second advent to the earth to establish the millennial kingdom.

A similar conclusion is reached by the study of the judgment of the Gentiles described in Matthew 25:31-46. Taking the Ezekiel passage and the Matthew passage together, the whole population of the earth at the second coming of Christ is in view. If all Israelites are dealt with in Ezekiel, all the others described as the "nations" or the Gentiles are in the Matthew judgment. In the Matthew passage, like that of Ezekiel 20, no mention is made of either resurrection or translation, though both are often read into the passage by posttribulationists somewhat desperate to combine all the passages.

The separation of Matthew 25 is similar to that of Ezekiel 20. The unbelievers, described as the "goats," are cast into everlasting fire by means of physical death, whereas the "sheep" enter the kingdom prepared for them—the millennial kingdom. While the judgment in Matthew 25, as in Ezekiel 20, is based on outward works, it is true here as elsewhere in Scripture that works are taken as evidence of salvation. The good works of the "sheep" in befriending the "brethren" (the Jewish people) is an act of kindness which no one but a believer in Christ would perform during the tribulation when Christian as well as Jew is hated by all the world. Ironside interprets the passage: "But this judgment, like the other, is according to works. The *sheep* are those in whom divine life is manifested by their loving care for those who belong to Christ. The *goats* are bereft of this, and speak of the unrepentant, who did not respond to Christ's messengers." [6] H. A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on the Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 337-38. The result of the judgment of the Gentiles is the purging of all unbelievers, with the believers, who are thereby left, granted the privilege of entrance into the kingdom.

The judgment of the Gentiles is an individual judgment, though some premillenarians have seen in it a description of national judgment. This misconception has arisen from the English translation where the Greek word *ethne* is rendered "nation." It is, of course, the same word precisely as would be used for Gentiles individually. Inasmuch as the nature of the judgment is individual, however, the use of "nation" in a political sense is misleading. No national group can qualify as a group as either a "sheep" or a "goat" nation, and no nation inherits either the kingdom or everlasting fire for its works. Eternal judgment must of necessity apply to the individual.

A comparison of this judgment of Gentiles again confirms the fact that this is an entirely different event than the translation of the church. This is, first of all, demonstrated by the time of the judgment. It occurs *after* the second advent and *after* a throne is set up in the earth. The translation of the church, according to all viewpoints, takes place *before* Christ actually

arrives on earth. The judgment of the Gentiles results in the purging of unbelievers out from among believers. The translation of the church takes believers out from among unbelievers, and leaves unbelievers untouched. This judgment also distinguishes the individuals involved on a racial basis. coming designated as (b). (a) At the time of the translation, the saints will meet the Lord in the air. (b) At the time of the second coming, Christ will return to the Mount of Olives which on that occasion will undergo a great transformation, a valley being formed to the east of Jerusalem where the Mount of Olives was formerly located (Zech 14:4-5). (a) At the coming of Christ for the church, the living saints are translated. (b) At the coming of Christ to establish His kingdom, there is no translation whatever. (a) At the translation of the church, Christ returns with the saints to heaven. (b) At the second coming, Christ remains on the earth and reigns as King. (a) At the time of the translation, the earth is not judged and sin continues. (b) At the time of the second coming, sin is judged and righteousness fills the earth.

(a) The translation is before the day of wrath from which the church is promised deliverance. (b) The second coming follows the great tribulation and outpoured judgment and brings them to climax and culmination in the establishment of the millennial kingdom. (a) The translation is described as an imminent event. (b) The second coming will follow definite prophesied signs. (a) The translation of the church is revealed only in the New Testament. (b) The second coming of Christ is the subject of prophecy in both Testaments. (a) The translation concerns only the saved of this age. (b) The second coming deals with saved and unsaved. (a) At the translation, only those in Christ are affected. (b) At the second coming, not only men are affected but Satan and his hosts are defeated and Satan is bound.

While it is evident that there are some similarities in the two events, these do not prove that they are the same. There are similarities also between the first and the second coming of Christ, but these have been separated by almost two thousand years. These similarities confused the Old Testament prophets but are easily deciphered by us today. Undoubtedly after the church is translated, tribulation saints will be able to see the distinction of the coming for translation and the coming to establish the kingdom in a similar clarity.

Before considering the opposing schools of thought represented in the posttribulation and midtribulation viewpoints, it is necessary first to examine an offshoot of pretribulationism known as the partial rapture view. While rejected by the overwhelming majority of pretribulationists and considered by them a doctrinal aberration, its issues must be presented before leaving the general field of pretribulationism. To this the next discussion will be devoted.

Dallas, Texas

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# Millennial Series

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## Chapter 26

### Part 26: Partial Rapture Theory

#### Definition of the Theory

It is generally held among pretribulationists that the entire church, composed of all believers in this age, will be translated and resurrected at the coming of Christ for them preceding the tribulation. There has arisen in the last century, however, a small group of pretribulationists who contend that only those who are faithful in the church will be raptured or translated and the rest will either be raptured sometime during the tribulation or at its end. As stated by one of its adherents: “The saints will be raptured in groups during the tribulation as they are prepared to go.”[1] Ira E. David, “Translation: When Does It Occur?” *The Dawn*, November 15, 1935, p. 358. He states further: “The basis of translation must be grace or reward. ... We believe that frequent exhortations in the Scriptures to watch, to be faithful, to be ready for Christ’s coming, to live Spirit-filled lives, all suggest that translation is a reward.”[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 358-59. The theory includes the concept that only the faithful saints will be resurrected at the first resurrection.

#### Historical Background

The modern theory of partial rapture seems to have originated in the writings of Robert Govett who published a book setting forth the theory as early as 1853.[3] Cf. Robert Govett, *Entrance into the Kingdom*. In this work he expounds his view that participation in the kingdom is conditional and depends upon worthy conduct. The most able exponent of the theory in the twentieth century is G. H. Lang.[4] Cf. G. H. Lang, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ; Firstborn Sons: Their Rights and Risks*. Others have made a significant contribution to the propagation of the theory. D. M. Panton, as editor of *The Dawn* (London), uses his publication to promote this teaching. Such writers as Ira E. David, Sarah Foulkes Moore, William Leask, and C. G. A. Gibson-Smith contribute to *The Dawn* articles in support of this theory. For the most part, however, the view is limited to a few adherents who are generally treated as heterodox by other pretribulationists.

#### General Reasons for Rejecting a Partial Rapture

It is commonly held by evangelical Christians that salvation is by grace rather than a reward for good works. The believer in Christ is justified by faith, and receives the many benefits of salvation quite apart from merit or worthiness on his part. This is normally carried over into the doctrine of translation and resurrection. Most pretribulationists as well as most posttribulationists consider the translation and resurrection of the saints on this basis. By contrast, the partial rapture teaching transfers both resurrection and translation from a work of grace to a work of reward for faithfulness. In so contending, they wrest principal Scriptures and misapply others. Opposition to the partial rapture point of view springs not only from particular texts but from the broad doctrine of the nature of salvation itself. It becomes therefore more than an argument about prophecy. It has its roots deep in the general theological perspective of the respective parties.

The opposition to the partial rapture view is also related to ecclesiology or the doctrine of the church. Most evangelicals distinguish the true church from the merely professing element. It is granted that outward conformity and organizational membership does not guarantee any blessing in the prophetic program. Pretribulationists as well as posttribulationists distinguish divine dealing with those genuinely saved and those who only profess salvation. Partial rapturists, however, are quite different in point of view from that commonly held. For them there are two classes of genuinely saved people—those

worthy of translation, and those not worthy. They therefore divide the body of Christ into two groups on a works principle. By contrast, the Scriptures teach that the body of Christ, composed of all true believers, is a unit and is given promises as such. It is inconceivable if the church is formed by grace that it should be divided by works.

The passages in Scripture [All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise indicated, are from the American Standard Version (1901).] dealing with the translation and resurrection of the church do not teach a partial rapture. Those for whom Christ is coming according to John 14:3 are those who are identified as believing in John 14:1. Those translated and those resurrected at the last trump of 1 Corinthians 15:52 are described as “we all” in 1 Corinthians 15:51. According to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, those resurrected are described as “the dead in Christ” (v. 16) and the “we” who are caught up are identified as those who “believe that Jesus died and rose again” (v. 14). The explicit teaching of Scripture points to the conclusion that the translation includes all living saints and the resurrection includes all the “dead in Christ.” Other Scriptures confirm that translation is not dependent on expectancy or watchfulness (1 Thess 1:9-10; 2:19; 5:4-11; Rev 22:12). Partial rapturists, however, contend for their point of view using various Scripture portions which are interpreted as sustaining their doctrine. These must be examined before the full character of their teaching becomes apparent.

## Scriptural Basis for Partial Rapture Theory

Most of the Scriptural basis for the partial rapture theory is found by its adherents in exhortations to watch or look for the coming of the Lord coupled with the teaching that some who fail to watch will not be ready when He comes. Passages commonly used include Matthew 24:40-51; 25:13; Mark 13:33-37; Luke 20:34-36; 21:36; Philippians 3:10-12; 1 Thessalonians 5:6; 2 Timothy 4:8; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 9:24-28; Revelation 3:3, 12:1-6. In citing these passages, little distinction is observed between references to Israel and references to the church, and passages referring to the second coming of Christ to establish the millennial kingdom are freely applied to the rapture or translation. In fact, many of the points of view of the partial rapture adherents are also held by posttribulationists. A study of these passages as interpreted by the partial rapturists will show the confusion of interpretation.

*Matthew 24:40-51; Mark 13:33-37.* The Matthew passage is essentially an exhortation to watch. The theme is stated, “Watch therefore: for ye know not on what day your Lord cometh” (v. 42). A further command is given, “Therefore be ye also ready; for in an hour that ye think not the Son of man cometh” (v. 44). The one not watching is described as one to be cut asunder and given the portion of hypocrites (v. 51). This passage is properly interpreted as belonging to the second coming rather than to the church, though expositors in general are not always of one mind on this. The people in view are the Israelite nation. Of these, some are watching and are faithful, taking care of the household of God. They are contrasted to those who beat their fellow servants, and “eat and drink with the drunken” (v. 48). It is obvious that something more than mere carelessness is in view. The faithfulness of those watching is evidence of true faith in Christ, whereas the unfaithfulness of those who are drunken is indicative of failure to believe to the saving of the soul. While works are in view, they are indicative of vital faith or its lack. In any case, there is nothing whatever said about the rapture or translation of the faithful. It is doubtful if there is any specific reference at all to the rapture or translation in the entire context of Matthew 24—25.

Partial rapturists usually seize upon Matthew 24:41 as substantiation of their position: “Then shall two men be in the field; one is taken, and one is left.” It is argued that the one taken is the one translated. Robert Govett states that the Greek word for “take” (paralambano) means “to take as a companion”—“ordinarily the result of friendship.”[5] Robert Govett, “One Taken and One Left,” *The Dawn*, 12:11, February 15, 1936, p. 516. The article lists the author only by the initials “R. G.” In this he finds a contrast to the Greek word for “took away” (eren), describing the judgment on unbelievers in Noah’s day (Matt 24:39). He offers confirmation in that paralambano is used in John 14:3 of the rapture, “will receive you unto myself.” The one left, according to Govett, is left to go through the tribulation.

A careful study of the usage here, however, does not sustain this exegesis. The context is Jewish, and does not refer to the church at all. The discussion is dealing with the end of the age, i.e., the entire interadvent age, not the church period as such. The *terminus ad quem* is the second coming, not the translation of the church. The Greek word paralambano is not specifically one describing a friendly relation. It is also used in John 19:17: “They took Jesus therefore: and he went

out, bearing the cross for himself....” This act of taking Jesus was certainly not a friendly association and compares to a taking in wrath. The act of taking away in Matthew 24:41 is best interpreted as the same as in verse 39 . In both the one taken away is taken in judgment. This is precisely what is done at the second coming of Christ when those who remain enter the blessing of the millennium, and those taken away suffer judgment. The evidence, then, for a partial rapture in this passage is completely dissolved upon examination of the evidence. The parallel passage in Mark 13:33-37 has, if anything, less evidence than the Matthew account, and it is answered in the same way.

*Luke 21:36.* This passage is cited by Lang as one of the conclusive proofs for the partial rapture theory.[6] G. H. Lang, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, pp. 88-89. The exhortation it presents is another command to watch: “But watch ye at every season, making supplication, that ye may prevail to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man.” Appeal is made particularly to the King James Version which uses the expression, “that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things.... Lang summarizes his argument in these words: “This declares distinctly: (1) That escape is possible from all those things of which Christ had been speaking, that is, from the whole End Times. (2) That that day of testing will be universal, and inevitable by any then on earth, which involves the removal from the earth of any who are to escape it. (3) That those who are to escape will be taken to where He, the Son of Man, will then be, that is, at the throne of the Father in the heavens. They will stand before Him there. (4) That there is a fearful peril of disciples becoming worldly in heart and so being enmeshed in that last period. (5) That hence it is needful to watch, and to pray ceaselessly, that so we may prevail over all obstacles and dangers and thus escape that era.”[7] *Loc. cit.*

All pretribulationists will agree that escape from the coming time of trial is provided for believers in Christ. All also agree that those who believe in Christ during the tribulation itself, while not kept out of the period, may have deliverance from it at the coming of the Lord to establish His kingdom. The point of dispute lies entirely in the conclusion that some true believers will be left to go through the tribulation while others are translated before it comes to pass.

While the exegesis of this passage is admittedly difficult, a careful study of the context provides a clue for its interpretation. The context has to do with signs preceding the second coming, obviously addressed to people who will be living on earth at that time. A possible interpretation based on the contrast of “ye” in verse 36 and “them” in verse 35 would be that the exhortation in question is addressed to the church in the days preceding the tribulation. However, the frequent interchange of the second and third persons in the entire passage does not provide much basis for this distinction (cf. second and third persons in vv. 27-28 ). The larger context deals with those living in the days of the signs and the exhortations largely concern them (cf. “look” in v. 28 ) rather than the church of the present age. The safest course would be to identify verse 36 as directed to those in the tribulation who anticipate the coming of the Lord to establish His kingdom. They indeed will “watch,” for His coming is their only hope. They certainly will pray, for only by divine help will they survive the period. Note should be taken that this passage does not speak of deliverance from the *period* or the *hour* of trial (cf. Rev 3:10), but only of deliverance from “all these things that shall come to pass.”

It should be observed that here, as in other passages often used by the partial rapturists, the rapture is not specifically mentioned, indeed is not indicated at all. Lang is inserting in the text what it does not say when he states that to stand before the Son of Man must necessarily mean in heaven. All men will stand before Christ *on earth* at the second coming (cf. Matt 25:32). To press the idea of escaping judgment as indicated in this passage to prove a partial rapture requires invention of the principal components of the doctrine. It is best to conclude that this passage does not teach a partial rapture because it does not refer to the rapture at all.

*Matthew 25:1-13.* The parable of the ten virgins is variously interpreted by pretribulationists, some taking it as referring to the tribulation saints[8] L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, V, 131ff. and others to the church.[9] H. A. Ironside, *Matthew*, p. 327. Partial rapturists, assuming that it refers to the church, find in the passage the concept of a selective translation—the foolish virgins being left behind because unprepared, the wise virgins being translated because ready. The answer given to the partial rapturists depends upon the interpretation of the passage as a whole. If Chafer is correct that the passage deals with the end of the interadvent age, the tribulation, rather than the church, then the passage has no relation to the partial rapture doctrine. Much is in favor of Chafer’s position. The church is ordinarily the bride, and in a figure of a wedding feast it would be incongruous to conceive of the church as represented by maidens attending the feast. The passage itself uses none of the characteristic terms relating to the church, such as *bride*, *body*, or the expression *in Christ*. There is no reference

whatever to translation or resurrection. The bridegroom comes to the place where the virgins are waiting in an earthly scene and remains in that earthly scene as far as the figure is concerned. These and many other observations point to excluding this passage from consideration.

However, even if the virgins represent the church in the present age, where is the proof that this is the true church, the company of those who are saved? As commonly interpreted by such writers as H. A. Ironside,[10] *Loc. cit.* the virgins represent the professing church. True believers are identified as having oil in their lamps, typical of the Holy Spirit. Mere professors have the appearance but no oil, that is, are not genuinely regenerated and indwelt by the Spirit. If watchfulness is necessary for worthiness, as partial rapturists characteristically argue, then none of the ten virgins qualify for “they all slumbered and slept.” The command to “watch” in verse 13 has, then, the specific meaning of being prepared with oil—being genuinely regenerated and indwelt by the Spirit rather than having unusual spirituality. The clear teaching is that “watching” is not enough. This passage would serve to refute the partial rapturists instead of sustaining their viewpoint. Only by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit can one be qualified for entrance into the wedding feast, but all the wise virgins enter the feast.

*Luke 20:34-36.* This passage is used by the partial rapturists mostly because of the expression “they that are accounted worthy to attain that world [age]...are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection” (Luke 20:35-36). The context indicates that the passage deals with the question of the state of those raised from the dead. Those who are counted worthy of the resurrection of the righteous at the beginning of the millennial age indicated in the passage are evidently the saved who have died and are at that time raised from the dead. Not only is the idea of partial rapture foreign to the passage, but the passage does not deal with the subject of rapture at all. If the rapture takes place before the tribulation, this scene is related to the posttribulational resurrection. According to Daniel 12:1-2, at that time—the end of the tribulation—“every one that shall be found written in the book” will be delivered, whether living or dead. There is no partial rapture here nor is the resurrection of the righteous divided on the principle of being worthy. This passage can therefore be excluded from the argument entirely.

*Philippians 3:10-12.* In this passage Paul speaks of his surpassing desire to know Christ, “if by any means I may attain unto the resurrection from the dead” (v. 11 ). It is the contention of partial rapturists that Paul had in mind the necessity of faithfulness in the hope of meriting resurrection at the time of the first resurrection, i.e., before the millennium, instead of waiting until later. Govett translates Philippians 3:10-11 as follows: “That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, if by any means I might attain to the select resurrection from among the dead.”[11] R. Govett, *Entrance into the Kingdom*, I, 31.

It is commonly accepted by pretribulationists that the resurrection to which Paul referred was indeed a “select resurrection,” but Govett’s translation is interpretation rather than a literal translation. A literal translation would be “to attain to the resurrection the one out of the dead.” It is clear that the passage refers to a resurrection which includes only the righteous dead, though this is usually denied by amillenarians. The resurrection in view is undoubtedly the resurrection of the “dead in Christ” (1 Thess 4:16). Paul’s ambition was not, however that he might die and then, perchance, be accounted worthy of resurrection at that time. His hope was that he might attain to it in the sense of being still alive when the event took place, which would mean that he would be translated rather than resurrected. Paul had no doubt that he would be included in the event. Later he wrote Timothy, “I am not ashamed; for I know him whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to guard that which I have committed unto him against that day” (2 Tim 1:12).

The resurrection of which Paul speaks is not of reward as Govett argues. Govett writes: “It is evident at a glance, that the resurrection which the apostle so earnestly sought, was not the general resurrection. The wicked shall partake of that, whether they desire it or not. Paul then could not express any doubts of his attaining to that, or speak of it as an object of hope. It remains then, that it be a peculiar resurrection: *the resurrection of reward*, obtained by the just, while the wicked remain in their graves.”[12] *Ibid*, I, 34.

In refutation of this error, 1 Thessalonians 4:16 is plain: the resurrection will include all the dead in Christ, all who by grace through faith have trusted Christ and have even now been given this new position in Christ in place of their old estate in Adam. There is no justification for building upon Paul’s hope a resurrection of reward to be attained only by a small portion

of the church of Christ born of the Spirit and washed in the blood of the Lamb. Resurrection is a part of the gift of God, never a reward for human works; however, it may justify faithfulness and even martyrdom on the part of the believer. Paul's point of view is that if the resurrection is sure, what does it matter if the road before him is one of suffering and even death. The means, however difficult, are justified by the end.

The partial rapture view of this passage brings out in bold relief that their position not only involves a partial rapture but a partial resurrection of believers. While believers may not be raised at the same time, the principle of the stages of resurrection—some at the translation of the church, some after the tribulation—is based upon the sovereign program of God for the church and for the Old Testament saints, not upon a works principle or evaluation of faithfulness among the saints. Rewards there shall be, but resurrection is promised all believers.

*1 Thessalonians 5:6.* This passage is another exhortation to watch: “So then let us not sleep, as do the rest, but let us watch and be sober.” The contrast here again is not between some believers who watch and other believers who do not. Rather, believers are exhorted to do that which is in keeping with their expectation—watch for the coming of the Lord. Those who sleep are obviously the unsaved as described in *1 Thessalonians 5:7*: “For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that are drunken are drunken in the night.” By contrast, those who “are of the day,” i.e., those who are true believers, should have lives in keeping with their faith. This passage does not teach any more than the others considered that there will be a partial rapture of some believers. The distinction is between those saved and those unsaved.

*2 Timothy 4:8.* This verse is a glorious affirmation of Paul's hope of reward: “Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, but also to all them that have loved his appearing.” This passage clearly prophesies reward for Paul and others who “love his appearing.” This revelation says nothing of a partial rapture as a part of that reward. It is rather that all believers in Christ are raptured, and then apportioned rewards according to their works.

*Titus 2:13.* The hope of the believer is expressed graphically in this familiar verse : “Looking for that blessed hope and appearing of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.” This attitude of expectation is normal for true Christians, but is not here or elsewhere made a condition for being raptured. Only by reading into the passage a preconceived doctrine can the partial rapture be found here.

*Hebrews 9:24-28.* The entrance of Christ into heaven and his return when he “shall appear a second time, apart from sin, to them that wait for him, unto salvation” (v. 28 ) is the theme of this portion of Scripture. Partial rapturists seize upon the phrase, “to them that wait for him,” as indicating that only such believers as are actively waiting for Christ will be raptured. The obvious answer is that those who are here described are Christians pictured in characteristic attitude of waiting or anticipating the completion of the salvation of which they now have the first fruits. All Christians worthy of the name anticipate the future completion of God's program of salvation for them. The phrase upon which partial rapturists put so much emphasis is more of an aside than the main revelation of the passage. The main point is that Christ is going to return and complete at his second coming the salvation which He provided in His death at His first coming. The figure is that of the priest who, having sacrificed, goes into the holy of holies and then appears the second time to those on whose behalf He has been ministering. In the sense used in this passage all true Christians are waiting for Christ in His second coming.

*Revelation 3:3.* This passage, addressed to the church at Sardis, is another command to watch: “Remember therefore how thou has received and didst hear; and keep it and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.” This passage is addressed to a local church at Sardis in which, no doubt, there were both true Christians and merely professing ones. The church had at one time a live testimony but had slipped from this (vv. 1-2 ). The challenge now is to correct this fundamental spiritual fault lest Christ come in judgment when they are not ready for Him. The judgment which will fall upon the church at Sardis will obviously deal with those who are unsaved. Those who do not heed the message of Christ and ignore the warning are by so much demonstrating their fundamental lack of faith and salvation.

*Revelation 3:10.* This favorite text of partial rapturists is a promise to the church at Philadelphia: “Because thou didst keep

the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.” D. M. Panton declares in connection with his support of the partial rapture theory based upon this text: “He bases it solely on the ‘kept’ word. He flings open the door to rapture into heaven.... Second Advent truth, on which our Lord bases the Angel’s escape, is far from being ‘kept’ by all the children of God...the Lord thus bases rapture foursquare on fidelity, not conversion.”[13] D. M. Panton, “An Open Door,” *The Dawn*, 26:11, November 1948, p. 327.

This passage brings out clearly that the partial rapture theory depends upon a works principle—the rapture not a fruit of salvation but a reward for good works. As in other passages, the problem is whether this is the fundamental teaching of Scripture. Salvation is often traced to faith alone—as in Romans 4, and in other passages the evidence of salvation, good works, is pointed to as necessary to salvation (James 2:21-26). The promise of Revelation 3:10 falls into the same category as James 2. The evidence of faith, keeping the Word of God, is the ground for the promise. Here as elsewhere, however, the distinction is not between believers with works and believers without works. The main thought of the passage is that those without works are not true believers. To accept the principle of translation on the basis of works upsets the whole doctrine of justification and absence of all condemnation for the believer. Further, it vitiates all the promises given to the church as a whole relative to both resurrection and translation. The prominence of works as evidence of faith can never be proof of the negation of faith as the sole ground of the grace of God.

The works principle immediately breaks down when the question is asked: How much works? Evidently no Christian lives perfectly and the Philadelphian Church is no exception. To make the one doctrine of the Lord’s return one and the same as to “keep the word of my patience,” is entirely unjustified. Many, commentators identify the phrase, “word of my patience,” as being simply a reference to the steadfastness of the Philadelphians under trial.[14] Cf. F. W. Grant, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 206.

James Moffatt writes: “The precise sense therefore is not ‘my word about patience’ (*i.e.*, my counsel of patience as the supreme virtue of these latter days, so Weiss, Bousset, etc.), but ‘the word, or the preaching, of that patience which refers to me’ (*i.e.*, the patient endurance with which, amid present trials, Christ is to be served; so Alford, Spitta, Holtzm.). See Ps xxxviii (xxxix).... The second reason for praising the Philadelphian Christians is their loyal patience under persecution, as well as the loyal confession of Christ (ver. 8) which had possibly brought on that persecution.”[15] James Moffatt, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, V, 367-68. whatever for dragging in the church as individuals composed largely of Gentiles in racial origin.

It is true that the church is positionally in Christ and some pretribulationists have argued that the church in Christ is also caught up and that the rapture is prefigured in Revelation 12:5. Ironside says, “The man-child symbolizes both Head and body—the complete Christ.”[17] H. A. Ironside. *Lectures on the Revelation*, p. 212. Even if this teaching be allowed, it is clear that all, not part, of the man child is caught up. The “rest of the seed” are neither Christ nor the church, but the physical seed of Israel unsaved at the time of the rapture and thereby thrust into the tribulation period of which this passage speaks. The context gives no ground whatever for the conclusion that the man child represents the spiritual element of the church raptured while the unspiritual element is left behind.

## Conclusion

Opposition to the partial rapture view in addition to refutation of their interpretation of key Scriptures is based upon three broad principles: First, the partial rapture view is based upon a works principle in opposition to Scriptural teaching on grace. The translation and resurrection of the church is a part of its salvation provided by grace and is a reward only in the sense that it is a fruit of faith in Christ. To accept a works principle for this important aspect of salvation is to undermine the whole concept of justification by faith through grace, the presence of the Holy Spirit as the seal of God “unto the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30), and the entire tremendous undertaking of God on behalf of those who trust Him. The issue of reward is properly settled at the judgment seat of Christ, not before in a partial translation resulting in the infliction of the tribulation on other believers.

Second, the partial rapture view divides the body of Christ. While the Scriptures portray difference in God's dealing with saints of the Old Testament as compared with saints of the present age, and also a difference between the church and tribulation saints, there is no Scriptural justification for dividing the divine unity of the body of Christ joined in organic union with Christ and all fellow, believers. A division such as partial rapturists teach is unthinkable in view of the doctrine of the one body.

The third objection to the partial rapturist position is the fact that they ignore plain teaching concerning the translation of all true believers when the event takes place. Attention was called earlier to the "we all" of 1 Corinthians 15:51 and the expression "the dead in Christ" in 1 Thessalonians 4:16. The identity of those translated is described as those who "believe that Jesus died and rose again" (1 Thess 4:14). Confirming Scriptures are found elsewhere as well (1 Thess 1:9-10; 2:19 ; 5:4-11 ; Rev 22:12). The partial rapture view has been embraced by only a small fragment of evangelical Christians and has not been recognized by any evangelical Protestant group. It is an interpretation limited to a few and cannot be regarded as within the bounds of normal Biblical premillennialism.

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 27

### Part 27: Posttribulationism

Posttribulationism has long been a common doctrine held by the majority of the church. Most premillenarians today, however, hold to the pretribulational translation of the church. As ordinarily defined, posttribulationism is the teaching that the church will be translated *after* the predicted tribulation, and therefore its adherents believe that the church must pass through this prophesied time of trouble. Posttribulationism is the ordinary view of practically all amillenarians and postmillenarians. It is embraced by Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic; it is followed by many Protestants, conservative as well as modern liberals. Posttribulationism, as far as the church as a whole is concerned, is the majority view. Among premillenarians, however, the majority accept the pretribulational position, though at the present time there is a resurgence of posttribulationism. Generally speaking, pretribulationism is an outgrowth of premillennial interpretation of the Scriptures and is properly considered a teaching within this point of view. Very rarely is it encountered outside premillennialism. To a large extent, pretribulationism depends upon much the same arguments and principles of interpretation as characterize premillennialism, while posttribulationism fits other millennial views.

### Variations of Posttribulationism

While posttribulationism in itself is a simple concept, so many variations are found within the general teaching that it is difficult to affirm a norm. Two prevailing concepts account for most viewpoints within posttribulationism: (1) the teaching that the entire present age is the tribulation; (2) the teaching that the tribulation will occur at the end of the present age preceding the translation and second advent of Christ. These two concepts are seldom kept in strict distinction, but describe the two tendencies. The former requires more spiritualization of Scripture than the latter.

George L. Rose declares plainly in his defense of posttribulationism that the tribulation began with the early church: “The record left us in the book of The Acts of the Apostles leaves no room to doubt that, ‘tribulation’ began almost as soon as the Church was born.... At the time of Stephen’s death ‘there was a GREAT PERSECUTION against the church which was at Jerusalem...Saul made havock of the church, entering into every house, arresting men and women committed them to prison’ (Acts 8:1-3). *This ‘great persecution’ mentioned in Acts 8:1, is called ‘tribulation’ in Acts 11:19 therefore, ‘great persecution’ is ‘great tribulation.’* The same Greek word, thlipsis, being used in the same manner which Jesus used it in Matt 24:21, in speaking of ‘great tribulation’...”[1] George L. Rose, *Tribulation Till Translation*, pp. 68-69. On the basis of this concept of the tribulation, there is no room left for argument—the church is already in the tribulation and has been since the first century. The whole issue is settled by identifying the great tribulation with the trials of the church throughout the present age.

Fromow dismisses the argument for pretribulationism in much the same fashion as Rose. Fromow states: “The Church is *already* passing through ‘the Great Tribulation.’... This term *Great* embraces the whole period of the Church’s course on earth, and should not be confined to the final 3½ years or the second half of Daniel’s seventieth week of intensest tribulation. It began with the first saints after the Fall, and includes all who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb until the Second Advent of Christ.”[2] George H. Fromow, *Will the Church Pass Through the Tribulation?* p. 2. Fromow does Rose one better. Instead of beginning with the present age, Fromow begins the tribulation with Adam. Under either view, the church must obviously pass through the tribulation.

Most posttribulationists, however, do not attempt to settle the issue in such a summary manner. While pointing out, as

pretribulationists also do, that there will be tribulation throughout the age, the many predictions of a particular “great tribulation” described as without precedent in its severity (Jer 30:7; Dan 12:1; Matt 24:21) is taken by the majority of posttribulationists as indicating a future period of great trouble occurring prior to the second advent of Christ. This point of view has the advantage in that those who hold this view are able to take with some literalness the description of the period, which would be impossible if it were the entire present age.

Representative of this viewpoint is the amillenarian Louis Berkhof who names five definite signs preceding the second advent, one of which is the great tribulation. Berkhof states: “Jesus certainly mentions the great tribulation as one of the signs of His coming and of the end of the world, Matt 24:3.”[3] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 700. Likewise, Norman S. McPherson, a premillenarian who defends the posttribulationist position, writes: “This Great Tribulation is described as a time of unprecedented suffering to come upon the world. It will begin soon after the abomination, predicted by Daniel, stands in the holy place of the restored Jewish temple. It will be followed by the glorious appearing of Christ who comes for the purpose of gathering out of the world His elect.”[4] Norman S. McPherson, *Triumph Through Tribulation*, p. 13. It may be concluded, therefore, that there are two widely differing viewpoints among posttribulationists respecting their definition of what it means for the church to pass through the tribulation. One understands the tribulation to refer to trouble which characterizes the present age. The other regards the tribulation as future.

The distinction between the two views within posttribulationism is nominal, however. Rose, after arguing strenuously that the church is already in the great tribulation, makes a sharp distinction between (1) “*the great tribulation*,” (2) “the unprecedented ‘time of trouble’,” and (3) the “‘great day of wrath’ which will come upon the ungodly.”[5] Rose, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77. In a word, according to Rose, the great tribulation is the entire period of persecution of the elect since Adam; the “time of trouble” is a future period of trial for the elect; the “great day of wrath” is the future time of judgment of the wicked. By this device, Rose proves that the church, on the one hand, is already in the tribulation; on the other hand, is headed for a future time of trouble. He can therefore prove that the church will go through the tribulation, indeed is already in tribulation, and at the same time deny that the second coming is imminent.

## Arguments for Posttribulationism

On one point all posttribulationists agree. If there is a future time of trouble just prior to the second advent, the church will need to pass through the period before the second advent of Christ brings deliverance. Pretribulationists, on the other hand, affirm that the church will be translated before that final time of trial. In order to weigh the strength of the posttribulationist position, twelve major arguments advanced in support of posttribulationism will be considered in an objective way with such criticism as may be required under each point.

*Ad hominem argument.* One of the unfortunate features of the argument for posttribulationism is the general tendency toward the *ad hominem* type of debate wherein attacks upon the persons who hold the pretribulation position are substituted for solid argument from the Scriptures. While posttribulationists are not alone in this, any impartial observer will soon find that posttribulationist literature, particularly of the controversial type, abounds in such references.

Alexander Reese, who has produced the classic defense of posttribulationism, gives large space in his argument for invective against pretribulationists. Hogg and Vine in their analysis of Reese’s *ad hominem* argument summarize it as follows: “Mr. Reese does not seem to have made up his mind whether those whom he attacks so trenchantly are fools, or only knaves; his language, indeed, frequently suggests that they are both! Here are some things he says about them taken at random as the pages are turned: They are guilty of ‘aggressive sophistry and fanatic exegesis,’ and of ‘paltry reasoning.’ They prefer ‘any rubbish to the true and obvious explanation’ of a passage, and they ‘wrest the Scriptures.’ Their preference for the line of teaching they favor is ‘no longer a question of exegesis.... It is simply a question of ethics....’ They are not God-fearing readers of the Bible, but ‘theorists,’ ‘showing little acquaintance with great exegesis.’ Their teaching is ‘inconsistent and ludicrous’ in its ‘absurdity.’... ‘They wrote their errors on their broad phylacteries.’... They ‘are misguided and misleading teachers.’”[6] Hogg and Vine, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 9-10.

Fromow writes: “We would lovingly ask, is there not a strain of weak-kneed, invertebrate, spineless sentiment in this idea of

escaping tribulation?”[7] Fromow, *op. cit.*, p. 4. Oswald T. Allis in his discussion of pretribulationism takes as his one and main point: “1. *Pretribulationism Appeals to Unworthy Motives.*”[8] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 207. He describes pretribulationism as “an essential *feature* of Dispensationalism”[9] *Ibid.*, p. 216. leading to “tragic results.”[10] *Loc. cit.* Allis charges in his opening statement: “Before examining the evidence brought forward in support of this doctrine, it may be well to notice how singularly calculated it is to appeal to those selfish and unworthy impulses from which no Christian is wholly immune,” i.e., to avoid suffering in the tribulation.[11] *Ibid.*, p. 207. He further accuses pretribulationists as being “encouraged to view the present evil state of the world with composure which savors not a little of complacency.”[12] *Loc. cit.* While some of Allis’ argument is directed against the doctrine rather than the adherents, his main argument is that pretribulationists appeal “to selfish and unworthy impulses” and adopt a doctrine which has “tragic” and “radical” bearing on orthodox doctrine as a whole. Unless martyrdom is something to be earnestly desired and cheerfully sought, it is difficult to see why it is so contrary to Christian principles to desire to avoid these contingencies. While the charge is made that this has influenced pretribulationists, neither Allis nor anyone else has ever shown that the natural desire to avoid the awful period of the tribulation has ever been an influential factor in the doctrines related to pretribulationism. Rather, pretribulationism is based solely on principles of interpretation and exegetical reasons as Allis inadvertently admits when he defines pretribulationism as “an essential feature of Dispensationalism.”[13] *Ibid.*, p. 216.

The appeal to passion and prejudice and the open attempt to charge pretribulationists with unworthy and unspiritual motives is to slander the many godly men who have sincerely held this position after prayerfully seeking the teaching of the Scriptures on this point. It should be obvious to any impartial observer that the differences between pretribulationists and posttribulationists are doctrinal and exegetical, not spiritual, and that worthy and godly men are found on both sides of this question. This entire approach, given such prominence by posttribulationists, does their cause more harm than good and raises the question as to why such an approach is used if their doctrine has a sound exegetical basis. Inasmuch as posttribulationists themselves give this argument first place in prominence, it has been necessary to dispose of it in that order. Actually, posttribulationism is founded upon doctrinal premises which now may be discussed.

*The historical argument.* One of the strongest arguments of the posttribulationist view is the claim that pretribulationism is a new doctrine. Reese after citing a formidable array of ancient and modern scholars who were posttribulationists states: “The fact that so many eminent men, after independent study of the Scriptures, reached similar conclusions regarding the subject of Christ’s Coming and Kingdom, creates a strong presumption—on pre-millennial presuppositions—that such views are scriptural, and that nothing plainly taught in Scripture, and essential to the Church’s hope, was overlooked.”[14] Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, p. 19. He goes on to trace the rise of pretribulationism: “About 1830, however, a new school arose within the fold of Pre-millennialism that sought to overthrow what, since the Apostolic Age, have been considered by all pre-millennialists as established results, and to institute in their place a series of doctrines that had never been heard of before. The school I refer to is that of ‘The Brethren’ or ‘Plymouth Brethren,’ founded by J. N. Darby.”[15] *Loc. cit.* Similar quotations could be multiplied from other posttribulationists.

In making the charge, however, posttribulationists choose to ignore facts which greatly limit the pertinence of this point. Posttribulationists themselves consider the doctrine of the second advent a series of events, rather than one great climactic act of God. Rose in his posttribulationist argument postulates a period of time between the translation of the church and the second advent proper in which “the great day of wrath” falls upon the wicked. He believes that between the rapture and the judgment of the nations (Matt 25) many will receive Christ as Savior: “But when Christ comes in power and great glory, and every eye shall see him; two things will take place within a very short time. First, the wilfully wicked will be destroyed with the brightness of His coming in the conflict that immediately occurs. Second, ‘Multitudes that are in the valley of decision,’ will immediately receive Christ.”[16] Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

According to Rose, the righteous in the judgment of the nations are those who receive Christ in the period between the rapture and the judgment of the nations. If it is possible within the framework of posttribulationism to have a series of events of which the rapture is in “the early morning of the ‘day of the Lord,’”[17] *Ibid.*, p. 277. why is it so unthinkable to move it still earlier in the series and make it precede the time of tribulation? If the church is to be distinguished from the righteous among the nations at the judgment of Matthew 25, why not distinguish the church from the tribulation saints as well?

The fact is that Reese, who was quoted earlier, has overstated the significance of the viewpoint of the early church relative to

this question. There was no doctrine on this question which could be considered “established results.” The early church believed in a coming time of trouble, in the imminent coming of the Lord, and the millennium to follow. How the coming of the Lord could be a daily expectation as is clearly indicated by the early Fathers, and at the same time have a lengthy series of events preceding the second advent, was apparently not discussed or ever resolved in the early church. If major doctrines like the Trinity and the procession of the Spirit took centuries to find acceptable statement, it is hardly to be expected that the problems of Eschatology would be all settled in the early centuries. The inroads of the spiritualizing principles of Origen, which caused the downfall of premillennialism in the third and fourth centuries along with the departure from the Scriptures which characterized the organized church until the Protestant Reformation, were hardly a climate in which an intricate problem such as pretribulationism versus posttribulationism could be solved.

The early church was far from settled on details of Eschatology though definitely premillennial. It was actually impossible for the tribulation question even to be discussed intelligently until the Protestant Reformation had restored a theological foundation which would support it. Unfortunately the Reformers went back to Augustine for the Eschatology instead of the early chiliastic Fathers, and until premillennialism was again established in the post-Reformation period the advance in the interpretation of prophecy had to wait. In a word, the early Fathers were neither pretribulationist nor posttribulationist in the modern meaning of the term. They simply had not raised the questions which are involved in this controversy.

Henry C. Thiessen has given a good summary of the testimony of the early church on this question: “Let us first note that, according to Moffat, ‘Rabbinic piety (*Sanh.* 98b) expected exemption from the tribulation of the latter days only for those who were absorbed in good works and in sacred studies.’ [Cf. possible allusion of Christ to this teaching, Luke 21:36.] Thus there was a Jewish background for the expectation that some men would not pass through the Tribulation. When we come to the early Fathers we find an almost total silence as to the Tribulation period. They abundantly testify to the fact of tribulations, but they say little about the future period called by preeminence The Tribulation. This fact should cause us no perplexity. These writers lived during the second and third centuries, and we all know that those were the centuries of the great Roman persecutions. The Church was passing through sore trials, and it did not much concern itself with the question of Tribulation yet to come. Perhaps it did not understand the exact nature of the period.”[18] Henry C. Thiessen, “Will the Church Pass Through the Tribulation?” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 92:189-90, April-June, 1935.

It may, therefore, be concluded that while the early church did not teach twentieth-century pretribulationism, neither did it teach modern posttribulationism. It is therefore a problem which must be settled on exegesis of the Scriptures rather than by polling the early Fathers.

*Argument from the nature of the tribulation.* Much of the controversy of the tribulation issue arises from a failure to agree on the definition of the tribulation itself. Among posttribulationists there is utter confusion on this point, some insisting the entire present age is the tribulation; others, like pretribulationists, regarding it as a future period. Obviously there can be no objective discussion concerning the church going through the tribulation until there is some agreement on basic terms.

Pretribulationists would agree with posttribulationists that the church has always had a measure of trial and tribulation. This is mentioned too often in Scripture to leave any room for argument (Matt 13:21; John 16:33; Acts 14:22; Rom 2:9; Rev 2:10). It is summed up in the words of Christ, “In the world ye shall have tribulation” (John 16:33). Many posttribulationists, however, agree with pretribulationists in holding that the great tribulation of which Christ spoke (Matt 24:21) is to be distinguished from this general experience of trial. The great tribulation, then, is a future period, properly identified with the last three and one-half years preceding the coming of Christ to establish His kingdom on earth. If so, the fact that the church is already in many trials is quite beside the point in determining whether it goes through the future period.

McPherson, a posttribulationist, rightly begins his discussion of posttribulationist arguments by treating the definition of the tribulation itself. He finds that out of fifty-five occurrences of the verb *thlibo* and the noun *thlipsis* only three refer specifically to the great tribulation.[19] McPherson, *op. cit.*, p. 13. He therefore concludes that, while most of the passages refer to the present age, the three mentioned refer specifically to a future period.

The minority of posttribulationists who want to settle the whole question on the basis of Scriptures referring to present trials

seem to be influenced by the desire to make pretribulationism ridiculous. The arguments of Fromow and Rose to this point, referred to previously, are of this character. In taking this line of argument, however, they do not face the evident fact that a period of trouble cannot be unprecedented and at the same time general throughout the age. The time of trouble referred to by Christ as the “great tribulation” was to have such a specific character as to make it a sign of the approaching second advent. The tendency of posttribulationism to blur the Scriptural description of the tribulation arises from the necessity to defend posttribulationism from certain contradictions. One of these is the question as to why saints of the present age who are perfectly justified by faith, given a perfect position of sanctification, and declared to be in Christ, should have to suffer the “great day of his wrath” in the tribulation. While Christians can be disciplined and chastened, they cannot justly be exposed to the wrath of God.

This apparent difficulty within posttribulationism is handled in various ways, but usually by distinguishing as Rose does, the time of trouble from the “great day of wrath.”[20] Rose, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77. Their thought is that Christians in the future time of trouble will experience persecution and trial but not wrath.

Harold J. Ockenga in defending posttribulationism makes the same distinction: “The church will endure the wrath of men, but will not suffer the wrath of God.... This distinction which has been of great help to me is generally overlooked by pretribulation dispensationalists.... Pretribulation rapturists identify the tribulation with the wrath of God. If this can be proved, we must believe that the church will be taken out of the world before the tribulation, for there is no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.”[21] Harold J. Ockenga, “Will the Church Go Through the Tribulation? Yes.” *Christian Life*, February 1955, p. 22.

The answer to this argument is found in the study of the passages describing the tribulation. No doubt, there will be special judgments which will fall only upon the unsaved. In Revelation 9, for instance, distinction is made between saved and unsaved in the judgment which falls upon the earth. In Revelation 7, a company of 144,000 are sealed from the twelve tribes of Israel and are apparently protected. On the other hand, many of the judgments by their very nature cannot distinguish saved from unsaved. The judgments of famine and the sword, or earthquakes and stars falling from heaven, war and pestilence, are not by their nature suitable for discriminatory judgment. They would fall upon just and unjust alike.

The principal difficulty of this posttribulation argument lies not in the question of whether the church will experience wrath as such but rather whether it will enter the day of wrath, i.e., the time period in which wrath will be poured out. In 1 Thessalonians 5:5, Christians are assured that they are “children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness.” The context is dealing with a time period, “the day of the Lord.” In this connection again, it is stated, “For God hath not appointed us to wrath” (1 Thess 5:9). The church of Philadelphia was promised: “I will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth” (Rev 3:10). They were promised deliverance from the *period* of future trouble. Christ in Luke 21:36 exhorts them: “Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man.” The only way one could escape “all these things” mentioned in the context—the events preceding the return of Christ in glory—would be to escape the *period* in which they occurred by being in a different place, i.e., being “before the Son of man,” who immediately before the second advent would be in glory. While therefore there may be a difference in the purpose of trial for the Christian and judgment upon the wicked, there is no justification for believing that the horrors of the great tribulation will thereby be relieved for those who believe in Christ in that day. Instead, they will have persecution and martyrdom in addition to the natural catastrophes which characterize that hour.

Speaking in general, therefore, the posttribulation argument is that Christians, while being sorely tried, will escape the judgments of the tribulation. The pretribulationist, while conceding there may be some difference in divine dealing with saved and unsaved in the period, believes that it will afford little relief for the saint in that day. It will give little comfort for Christians anticipating the future that there is this nominal difference in divine dealings with saved and unsaved in the tribulation.

*Argument from the nature of the church.* One of the major differences which separate posttribulationists from pretribulationists is disagreement on the nature of the church. Posttribulationists tend to include the saints of all ages in the

church. Scripture clearly indicates that there will be saints in the great tribulation period. If all saints are in the church, then the church would necessarily go through the tribulation. Many pretribulationists, however, believe that the word *church*, when used of the body of Christ—the whole of the saved in the present age—is limited in Scripture to saints of the present age. Old Testament saints and those who are saved in the tribulation and millennium are distinct from the church according to this view. This difference in definition is crucial in the question of whether the church will go through the tribulation because the word *ecclesia* (church) is never used in a tribulation passage. Only by identifying the saints of the tribulation with the church can posttribulationists offer any positive proof of the presence of the church.

Typical of the posttribulationist position is Fromow's statement: "A full survey of O.T. mentions of 'the Saints' or 'Gracious Ones' and of the 'Assembly' or 'Great Congregation,' terms employed throughout the Psalms and Prophecies of the O.T. would dispel the notion that the redeemed people of God of this age, or the Church, are not to be found in O.T. record and prophecy. We and they are members of the *same* body." [22] Fromow, *op. cit.*, p. 6. Fromow goes on to identify the term "elect" as another synonym. [23] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

McPherson presents the same argument in connection with the elect of Matthew 24:22. He writes: "There is nothing here to indicate who the elect are, although there is every likelihood the term refers to the Church, inasmuch as of the fifteen other occurrences of the word *elect* in the New Testament, one refers to Christ, another to certain angels, and there is no sound reason for supposing the other thirteen do not refer to the Church, or individual members of the Church." [24] McPherson, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

The answer to the posttribulationist definition of the church was discussed at length in connection with the relation of premillennialism to the church, and it need not be repeated here. It was pointed out then that while the word *ecclesia*, translated *church*, is found frequently in the Old Testament Septuagint translation and also in the New Testament to refer to various *congregations* assembled geographically, the word is never used in the sense of the corporate body of the saved except in this dispensation. Further, the word does not occur at all in the tribulation passages. These arguments are frequently brushed aside without an attempt to answer them by posttribulationists as witnessed in the quotations just given from Fromow and McPherson.

The highly significant fact stands without refutation from any posttribulationist that the *ecclesia*, the church as the body of Christ, is never mentioned as being in the tribulation in the major passages such as Revelation 4-19, Matthew 24—25, and is not found in any other tribulation context. The burden of proof is not on the pretribulationists. If the church is in the tribulation, why do not the posttribulationists cite texts where *ecclesia* is used in the translation in reference to a saved company? While an argument from silence is never final in itself, the whole point of posttribulationism would be conclusively won by just one reference placing the church in the tribulation.

Posttribulationists are wont to ask triumphantly, as does Orson P. Jones, "Did Jesus warn us to expect him BEFORE THE TRIBULATION? Did any apostle pen a line to the effect that Jesus will come BEFORE THE TRIBULATION? Chapter and verse! Please! If not a verse can be found stating that Jesus will come before the tribulation, why is it so widely taught? and seldom questioned?" [25] Orson P. Jones, "Plain Speaking on the Rapture Question." Unpublished tract. Jones goes on to point out that the Bible teaches that Christ will come after the tribulation. Pretribulationists all teach that Christ will return to the earth after the tribulation—this is not disputed. This fact does not settle the question of when the translation will take place. This sort of illogic advanced by Jones only adds to the confusion and proves nothing. If one were ready to reply in kind, one could ask: "Where in the Bible is the translation of the church stated to be after the tribulation?" "Where does it say that the *ecclesia* is in the tribulation?" "Chapter and verse, please!" The fact is that neither posttribulationism nor pretribulationism is an explicit teaching of Scripture. The Bible does not in so many words state either. Pretribulationism is based on the fact that it allows a harmony of the Scriptures relating to the second advent. The separation of the translation from the return of Christ to earth permits each of the two events, so different in character, to have its own place. It solves the problem of the confusing and contradictory details in the posttribulationist interpretation illustrated in the difficulty of the posttribulationists themselves to work out a harmony of prophecies related to the second advent.

The doctrine of the church is, then, determined in the question of whether the church will go through the tribulation. All

agree that saints will be found in the tribulation. Pretribulationism necessarily requires a distinction between these saints and the saints of the present age forming the church. This difference of opinion has seldom had a fair handling from posttribulationists who usually adopt a “Tut, tut, of course the church includes all saints” attitude. The pretribulationist position is dismissed as “dispensational,” as if that was the coup de grace of pretribulationism. Not only is pretribulationism dependent upon an ecclesiology which recognizes the unique place of the church of the present age, but it is also true that premillennialism logically stems from distinguishing Israel and the church much on the same theological basis. Agreement must be reached first on the pertinence of Ecclesiology to Eschatology before any significant debate can be held on the relative merits of posttribulationism versus pretribulationism.

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 28

### Part 28: Posttribulationism (continued)

*Denial of imminency of the return of Christ.* The teaching that Christ could come for His church at any moment is a doctrine of pretribulationism often singled out for attack by posttribulationists. Obviously, if the church must go through the tribulation, the imminent translation is a vain hope. Posttribulationists therefore labor either to deny imminency or to invest the word with a different meaning which does not require immediacy. Their denial of imminence is a major aspect of their argument against pretribulationism.

Posttribulationists are wont to give considerable space to this argument—more than can be allowed in rebuttal. (Cf. Robert Cameron, *Scriptural Truth about the Lord's Return*, pp. 21-69.) The following arguments are usually included in the posttribulationist statement: (1) the promise of Christ to Peter that he would die in old age (John 21:18-19); (2) various parables which teach a long interval between the time the Lord leaves and the time He returns (Matt 25:14-30); (3) intimations that the program for the present age is extensive (Matt 13:1-50; 28:19-20 ; Luke 19:11-27; Acts 1:5-8); (4) Paul's long-distance plans for missionary journeys and his knowledge of his approaching death, a tacit denial that he believed in the imminent return of Christ; (5) the prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem, preceding the second advent (Luke 21:20-24); (6) the specific signs of the second advent given to the disciples (Matt 24:1—25:30 ). The problem is further complicated for the pretribulationist in that nineteen hundred years have elapsed, indicating that it was, after all, the purpose of God to have an extensive period before the coming of the Lord. How then can these objections be answered?

At the outset it must be observed that most of the hindrances to the coming of the Lord at any moment in the first century no longer exist. A long period has elapsed; Peter and Paul have gone home to the Lord; only the specific signs of Matthew 24—25 remain to be fulfilled. Most of the difficulties to an imminent return have been resolved.

However, the question is whether the first-century Christians believed and taught the imminent return of Christ in the sense that it could occur at any moment. Most of the difficulties raised by posttribulationists dissolve upon examination. Peter was middle-aged at the time the prophecy of John 21:18-19 was given. By the time the teaching of the imminent translation of the church was fully preached and received in the church he was already well past middle life. The prophecy as recorded in John 21 apparently was not common property of the church until long after he died anyway and constituted no obstacle to belief in the imminency of the Lord's coming for the great majority of Christians. Even if known, the dangers of martyrdom as illustrated in the early sudden death of James and the difficulties of communication would leave most of the church with no knowledge on a given day whether Peter was alive or not.

The long period pictured by the parables could certainly be fitted into the doctrine of imminency. A long period for a journey might occupy only a few years, as far as the first-century Christians could determine. The extensive preaching of the gospel in the first century might likewise seem to satisfy the program of preaching to the ends of the earth. The coming of the Lord was in no wise contingent upon the gospel actually reaching every person. Under the pretribulationist interpretation, time is allowed for events to be fulfilled after the translation of the church. While the destruction of Jerusalem took place in A.D. 70, as far as first-century Christians could see it might have been delayed until after the rapture. In any case, the specific signs of the second advent could follow the translation. That Paul should receive specific revelation immediately before his death that he would die rather than be translated may have removed the imminency of the Lord's return for him in his last days but no more.

As has been shown in previous discussion of the doctrine of imminency in connection with pretribulationist arguments, the positive fact remains that Scripture abounds with exhortation to be looking for the return of the Lord. These positive commands, which are meaningful largely as related to imminency, are evidence far outweighing the difficulties raised against the doctrine. The return of the Lord if imminent justifies such descriptive words as *blessed*, *comfort*, *purifying*, and the like. If the posttribulationists are right, the hope of the Lord's return is reduced to the hope of resurrection, as few of the saints who would enter the tribulation would escape martyrdom.

*Argument that the resurrection of the saints occurs after the tribulation.* Alexander Reese in his major work attacking pretribulationism uses as his principal argument the resurrection of the saints as an event which follows the tribulation. (Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, pp. 34-94.) Reese points out that Darby believed that the resurrection of the Old Testament saints took place at the same time as the translation and resurrection of the church. Therefore, if it can be proved that the Old Testament saints are raised *after* the tribulation it would also prove that the church is translated at the same time. Reese states: "Now concerning the Rapture there are only three undisputed texts in the Bible that deal with it, namely: 1 Thess iv.17, 2 Thess ii.1, and John xiv.3; but there are many passages in both the O. and N. Testaments that speak of the resurrection of the holy dead, which, Darbyists assure us, takes place in immediate connexion with the Rapture" (*ibid.*, p. 34). Reese then proceeds to pile up proofs that the resurrection of the Old Testament saints occurs after the tribulation period.

While many pretribulationists have attempted to refute Reese on this point, there is a growing tendency to review the question of whether the Old Testament saints are, after all, raised at the same time as the church. Most of the old Testament passages of which Daniel 12:1-2 is an example do indeed seem to set up a chronology of tribulation first, then resurrection of the Old Testament saints. On the other hand, the passages dealing with the resurrection of the church in the New Testament seem to include only the church. The expression "the dead in Christ shall rise first" (1 Thess 4:16) seems to include only the church. The Old Testament saints are never described by the phrase "in Christ." The fact that the "voice of the archangel"—Israel's defender—is heard at the rapture is not conclusive proof that Israel is raised at that time. The tendency of followers of Darby to spiritualize the resurrection of Daniel 12:1-2 as merely the restoration of Israel, thereby refuting its posttribulationism, is to forsake literal interpretation to gain a point, a rather costly concession for premillenarians who build upon literal interpretation of prophecy. The best answer to Reese is to concede his point that the resurrection of Old Testament saints is after the tribulation, but to divorce it completely from the translation and resurrection of the church. Reese's carefully built argument then proves only that Darby was hasty in claiming the resurrection of the Old Testament saints at the time of the translation of the church. If the translation of the church is a different event entirely, Reese proves nothing by his argument.

The point at issue is the question when the translation and resurrection of the church will take place. There is not a single Scripture in either the Old or New Testament which relates the translation of the church to a posttribulationist coming of Christ. While Old Testament saints may be resurrected at Christ's posttribulationist coming, no mention is made of a translation of living saints. The reason that posttribulationists attempt to throw the burden of proof for a pretribulationist rapture on their opponents is that they themselves have no proof to the contrary. The fact that Old Testament saints and tribulationist saints are resurrected after the tribulation according to explicit Scriptures (Dan 12:1-2; Rev 20:4) raises the question why neither the translation nor the resurrection of the church is mentioned in this event. While silence is not explicit, it is nevertheless eloquent in this case. If posttribulationists had one positive Scripture on the time of the translation, it would save them much complicated argument.

*Argument that the principal words for the return of Christ refer to a posttribulationist coming.* Both pretribulationists and posttribulationists have been guilty of confusing the real issue by injecting technical meaning for certain words referring to the return of Christ. The principal words cited are *parousia*, usually translated "coming"; *apokalupsis*, translated "revelation," and *epiphaneia*, translated "appearing."

Posttribulationists have rightly argued that all three of these terms are used in connection with the return of Christ after the tribulation. The error lies in the attempt to make these words technical expressions referring to the second advent. A simple concordance study will demonstrate that these are general rather than specific terms and that all three of them are used of the coming of Christ at the translation and also of His coming at the second advent. Their common use no more proves that the two events are one and the same than the use of any other ordinary word (cf. John F. Walvoord, "New Testament Words for

the Lord's Coming," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 101:283-89, July-September, 1944).

The "coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus," Paul's friends (1 Cor 16:17), "the coming of Titus" (2 Cor 7:6-7), the "coming" of Paul himself (Phil 1:26, A.V., R.S.V.), the "coming" of the lawless one (2 Thess 2:9), and "the coming of the day of God" (2 Pet 3:12) are certainly not one and the same "coming." The use of *parousia* in these passages proves it is not a technical word. The same word is used of the coming of the Lord at the translation (1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thess 2:19; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess 2:1; James 5:7-8; 1 John 2:28). Some pretribulationists have erred in claiming the word *parousia* as a technical word referring to the rapture. That this is not correct is shown by its usage in passages referring to the coming of Christ after the tribulation (Matt 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Thess 3:13; 2 Thess 2:8; 2 Pet 1:16).

The other words, *apokalupsis* and *epiphaneia*, translated "revelation" and "appearing," are likewise used of both events. *Apokalupsis* is used of the revelation of Christ to the church at the rapture in a number of passages (1 Cor 1:7; Col 3:4; 1 Pet 1:7, 13). The church will "see him even as he is" (1 John 3:2). The world will see the glorified Christ when He returns after the tribulation (Luke 17:30; 2 Thess 1:7; 1 Pet 4:13).

*Epiphaneia* refers to the appearing of Christ. It is used of the incarnation of the Son of God (Luke 1:79; 2 Tim 1:10). As related to the translation of the church, it is used in 1 Timothy 6:14 and 2 Timothy 4:8. As relating to the coming of Christ after the tribulation, reference is found in 2 Timothy 4:1 and Titus 2:13.

The posttribulationist argument on these words proves only that the three words are used of both events. It does not prove that both comings are one and the same, and it is therefore worthless as a refutation of pretribulationism. While posttribulationists often ridicule the teaching that there should be more than one "coming" of Christ, there is no more reason why there should not be more than one future coming than there is against their own doctrine of a past coming and a future coming. To the Old Testament saint the division into one coming for suffering and another for glory and judgment was equally difficult to comprehend.

*Argument from the parable of the wheat and the tares.* Posttribulationists use the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13 both because of its general and its specific teaching. The parable, describing as it does the course of the present interadvent age, implies by its description of the growth of the wheat and the tares that a considerable time period must elapse. McPherson uses this phase of the parable to refute the doctrine of imminency: "Here again we find the implication of a very considerable passage of time" (Norman S. McPherson, *Triumph Through Tribulation*, p. 48).

Reese devotes an entire chapter to the subject, dealing mostly with details of the parable. He dwells on the statement that the tares are gathered out "first," just the opposite of what occurs at the rapture as the pretribulationists regard it: "But if anything was lacking to refute Darbyists' explanation of the parable, it is found in their treatment of the burning of the tares. The wording of the parable, 'Gather ye together *first* the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn' (v. 30), and the words of the Lord's interpretation (vv. 41-3), that the professors are gathered for judgment at the same crisis as the transfiguration of the righteous, naturally caused great embarrassment to men who separated them by several years" (Reese, *op. cit.*, p. 98).

It is undoubtedly true that pretribulationists are partly to blame for the confusion on this point in their identification of the harvest as the rapture. The *terminus ad quem* in Matthew 13 is not the rapture at all, in the opinion of the writer. The period in view is the entire interadvent age—the period in which the kingdom in mystery form would be on the earth, the entire time between the first and second advent of Christ. The church age as such is included, but the period in view in Matthew 13 begins with the first advent and extends to the second and is a longer period, having different termini than the church age. The point is that the translation and resurrection of the church is not the subject of this passage at all. If this suggested interpretation be adopted, it supplants the rather inadequate explanation of pretribulationists who try to harmonize the end of the age in Matthew 13 with the end of the church age.

However, Reese completely overlooks that his argument on the tares being gathered first is also a refutation of posttribulationism. According to the posttribulationist position as set forth by Rose and many others, the translation for them

also precedes rather than follows the judgment on the wicked. In Matthew 13 itself, under the parable of the good and bad fish, the “good” fish are gathered in “vessels” first and then the bad fish thrown away (Matt 13:48). Any argument on the order of events based on this passage creates as many problems for the posttribulationist as for the pretribulationist. The best answer is that the passage is dealing with the fact of separation, not the order of it; the division has to do with saints living at the end of the age, not saints who lived and died during the age, nor the church raptured before the age closes. The kingdom in mystery form existing during the entire period between the two advents of Christ does not end with the rapture of the body of Christ. Professing Christendom, a large aspect of the kingdom of heaven, goes right on without interruption. Saints who believe in the tribulation period are included in the kingdom. The precise terminology of the passage should be respected. The parable of the wheat and tares along with other similar parables has no definite bearing on the question of whether the church will go through the tribulation.

*Argument from the Day of the Lord.* There are few prophetic subjects about which there is more confusion than the theme of the Day of the Lord. The older pretribulationists such as Darby and the Brethren writers in general identified the Day of the Lord with the millennium and placed its beginning at the return of Christ to establish His earthly kingdom, an interpretation later popularized by the *Scofield Reference Bible* (*Scofield Reference Bible*, note, p. 1272). Under this viewpoint, the Day of the Lord begins *after* the tribulation. Brethren writers were therefore hard pressed to explain how the Day of the Lord could be an event which came like “a thief in the night” (1 Thess 5:2), i.e., unexpectedly and unannounced, as it would be preceded by such events as the great tribulation and other notable signs. Further, it jeopardized their teaching that the translation of the church was uniquely an event unheralded and imminent. Such passages as 1 Thessalonians 5, discussing the Day of the Lord, seemed to be connected with the translation of the church in the preceding verses (1 Thess 4:13-18). Post-tribulationists were not slow to take advantage of this area of confusion to drive home their own arguments. Reese, for instance, devotes a whole chapter to the subject in which he capitalizes on this apparent weakness (Reese, *op. cit.*, pp. 167-83).

The argument of Reese, while quite detailed, is summed up in this: that *all* references to “the Day” in Scripture refer to the Day of the Lord (*ibid.*, p. 167). Proceeding upon this sweeping generalization, he demonstrates that the translation of the church, the judgment of the saints, and the coming of the Day of the Lord occur at the same time—on “the Day.” In doing this he argues that the following Scriptural expressions are one and the same: “the day” (1 Thess 5:4; 1 Cor 3:13; Rom 13:11-12); “in that day” (2 Thess 1:10; 2 Tim 1:18; 4:18); “Messiah’s day” or “day of Christ” (Phil 1:6, 10; 2:16); “the day of our Lord Jesus Messiah” (1 Cor 1:7-8; 2 Cor 1:14); “the day of the Lord” (1 Cor 5:4-5; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:1-3).

To the unwary reader, his argument seems quite cogent. To those who analyze his argument, it will be apparent that he is guilty of begging the question. The only way that these various expressions occurring in different contexts could be made identical would be to assume first that the posttribulationists are right—the very point he is attempting to prove. The contexts of the various passages give no justification whatever for malting the word *day* a technical word meaning in every instance the day of the second advent. Far more reasonable is the approach which takes every instance according to its context, recognizing that the word *day* is a general word made specific only by the context in which it occurs. The “day” in view, accordingly, is the day pictured by each passage—in some instances an event occurring in a specific period compared to a twenty-four hour day, as in the day of judgment of Christians (1 Cor 3:13; 2 Tim 4:8). In other instances it is the Day of the Lord, a period including the entire millennial reign of Christ.

The problem left unsolved by the early pretribulationists in their discussion of the Day of the Lord has, however, a very simple solution which at one stroke lays to rest the wordy arguments of posttribulationists on this phase of the subject. The Day of the Lord as presented in the Old and New Testament *includes* rather than follows the tremendous events of the tribulation period. There seems some evidence that the Day of the Lord begins at once at the time of the translation of the church (cf. 1 Thess 5:1-9). The same event which translates the church begins the Day of the Lord. The events of the Day of the Lord begin thereafter to unfold: first the preparatory period, the first half of Daniel’s last seven years of Israel’s program preceding the second advent—the revelation of the man of sin, the formation of the revived Roman empire, finally reaching the stage of worldwide government, possibly as the last half of the period begins. Then there is the outpouring of judgments from on high, the seals of Revelation are broken, the trumpets of judgment sound, and the bowls of the wrath of God are poured out. The climactic event is the second coming of Christ to establish His kingdom, and the millennial age continuing the Day of the Lord is brought into being. In a word, the Day of the Lord begins *before* the tribulation time. When the day of

grace ends with the translation of the church, the Day of the Lord begins at once. This interpretation gives a cogent explanation of the multiplied Scriptures which relate the Day of the Lord to the tribulation period and at the same time solves all the problems raised by the posttribulationist view of the Day of the Lord.

*Argument from the Restrainer of 2 Thessalonians 2.* Pretribulationists frequently use the chronology of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 as evidence for the pretribulationist translation of the church (cf. previous discussion under Pretribulationism of the “Argument from the nature of the work of the Holy Spirit in this age,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, January-March, 1955, pp. 6-10). In refutation, some posttribulationists teach that the passage denies an imminent return of Christ by its declaration that two signs must be fulfilled first, namely, the rise of apostasy and the appearance of the man of sin. McPherson asks, “. . . why should Paul be so greatly concerned that no man deceive the Church concerning an event that allegedly has nothing to do with the Church?” (McPherson, *op. cit.*, p. 56). The answer to this question is not difficult to find. The Thessalonians evidently had received the erroneous suggestion that they were already in the Day of the Lord and that their present persecutions were those anticipated for this period. Paul’s answer is, in effect, that they are not in this period because it could not even begin before the two events mentioned were fulfilled. While no doubt apostasy had already begun, the man of sin had not been revealed. The cogency of Paul’s argument should be immediately apparent. He was demonstrating that the predicted Day of the Lord was still future. The passage is no comfort at all to posttribulationists, however, even though they deny the pretribulationist interpretation of it. Some posttribulationists concede that the restrainer is the Holy Spirit (cf. John J. Scruby, *The Great Tribulation: The Church’s Supreme Test*, p. 194). If so, the inference is obvious that the church must be translated first before the Day of the Lord and time of fearful persecution begin. Whatever bearing the passage has on the argument, its evidence is for pretribulationism. Even if the restrainer is not the Holy Spirit, the passage has no support for posttribulationism.

*Argument from the doctrine of the end.* Reese in his argument for the posttribulationist position cites the doctrine of the end as evidence (Reese, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-24). His argument is that the term *the end* is always used in Scripture for the end of the age, viz., the second coming of Christ to the earth. He claims to have agreement of the early Brethren writers on this score. As the term is used of the church, his claim is that this proves that the hope of the church is not translation before the tribulation but deliverance at its end. Reese cites five texts in support of his argument (1 Cor 1:7-8; Heb 3:6, 14; 6:11; Rev 2:26). After claiming the Brethren concede his position and agree with him, Reese then chides them for saying nothing at all on most of these passages—which it would seem would contradict his claim of their agreement. *paralambano* in Luke xvii.34-5, by *seize*. The use of this word in the N.T. is absolutely opposed to this; it is a good word; a word used exclusively in the sense of ‘take away with’ or ‘receive,’ or ‘take home’“ (*ibid.*, p. 214-15). Reese goes on to illustrate the usage in John 14:3, where it is used of the rapture. Once again, however, Reese is guilty of a hasty generalization which a simple concordance study would have eliminated. The truth is that *paralambano* means only “to take with” (*Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 484). The word does not in itself indicate whether the action is good or bad. The generalization that it is always used in a good sense is shattered, however, by the use of the word in John 19:6 where it refers to Jesus being taken to the cross by the soldiers. Reese’s objection to the pretribulationist interpretation of this passage falls with his unsustained generalization. Matthew 24:40-41 simply states that one is taken away. The fact that those taken away are judged and those who remain enter the kingdom is taught explicitly in the context (Matt 25:31-46). The pretribulationist interpretation is therefore more in keeping with the usual premillennial interpretation of events at the beginning of the millennium.

*Summary.* It is not necessary to recapitulate the dozen common posttribulation arguments considered and their refutation. Suffice it to say that pretribulationists have an adequate answer for each posttribulation contention. Most important is the fact that posttribulationists have not a single Scripture passage where the church as the body of Christ is found in the events of the tribulation time preceding the second coming. The precise teaching of the translation of the church is never found in passages dealing with the return of Christ to establish His kingdom on earth. It has been shown that the arguments for posttribulationism depend upon identification of the church with tribulation saints—which they assume but never are able to demonstrate. Frequently their whole argument is based on confusing the great tribulation still future with the common trials of the saints throughout the age. An examination of the posttribulationist arguments most commonly advanced has revealed no need of retreating one step from the blessed hope of the imminent return of Christ for His own.

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 29

### Part 29: Midtribulationism

#### Definition of the Theory

Midtribulationism is a comparatively new interpretation of Scripture relating to the translation of the church. Its principal expositor is Norman B. Harrison. Accepting some of the basic premises of pretribulationism, such as the future character of the seventieth week of Daniel (Dan 9:27), midtribulationism places the translation of the church at the middle of this week instead of at its beginning as do the pretribulationists. In contrast to the posttribulationists, it holds that the translation takes place before the time of wrath and great tribulation instead of after it.

Midtribulationism is, therefore, a mediate view between posttribulationism and pretribulationism. As such it has commended itself to some who for one reason or another are dissatisfied with both pretribulationism and posttribulationism. It has also provided a place for certain prophecies to be fulfilled before the translation of the church instead of afterward, and at the same time is able to claim the promises of comfort and blessing which seem to be denied by the posttribulationists who take the church through the entire period.

Midtribulationists usually do not use the term of themselves, and prefer to classify themselves as pretribulationists—pretribulationist in the sense that Christ is coming before the “great tribulation” which characterizes the last half of Daniel’s seventieth week. Harrison refers to his view as teaching “His pre-Tribulation coming” (Norman B. Harrison, *The End*, p. 118). The term *midtribulation* is justified by the common designation of the entire seventieth week of Daniel as a period of tribulation even though pretribulationists can agree that only its latter half is properly “the great tribulation.”

#### Important Issues

The midtribulationist interpretation bristles with important theological, exegetical, and practical problems, and it differs radically from normal pretribulationism. Among the crucial issues are such questions as the following: (1) Does the seventh trumpet of Revelation mark the beginning of the great tribulation? (2) Is the rapture of the church in Revelation 11? (3) Is the seventh trumpet the “last trumpet” for the church? (4) Do the programs for Israel and the church overlap? (5) Is the hope of the imminent return of Christ unscriptural? In general, the midtribulationist view requires a different interpretation of most of the important Scriptures relating to the coming of Christ for the church.

#### Does the Seventh Trumpet of Revelation Begin the Great Tribulation?

One of the crucial issues in the midtribulationist theory is the question of whether the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11 begins the great tribulation. In fact, it is not too much to say that the whole teaching of midtribulationists depends upon this identification. The midtribulationist view cites many other Scriptures, however. Harrison appeals to the following passages: Exodus 25—40 ; Leviticus 23; Psalm 2; Daniel 2, 7, 9 ; Matthew 13; 24—25 ; 1 Thessalonians 4:13—5:10 ; 2 Thessalonians 2 (*ibid.*, p. 35). It is clear from reading his discussion, however, that these are supporting passages, or problems which have to be solved in the midtribulationist view, rather than the crux of the issue.

The midtribulationist view requires the interpretation that the first half of the Book of Revelation is not the great tribulation.

In general, the theme song of its adherents is that the church will go through the “beginning of sorrows” (Matt 24:8, A.V.), or “beginning of travail” (A.S.V.), but not through the “great tribulation” (Matt 24:21) as Harrison indicates in his “Harmonized Outline” of Matthew 24—25 and Revelation 1—20 (*ibid.*, p. 54). It is their position that the events of the seven seals as well as the judgments of the first six trumpets are related to the first three and one-half years of Daniel’s seventieth week and therefore are not a description of the “great tribulation.”

Harrison states: “‘Wrath’ is a word reserved for the Great Tribulation—see ‘wrath of God’ in 14:10, 19 ; 15:7 ; 16:1 , etc.” (*ibid.*, p. 91). He implies that there is no wrath of God mentioned during the period of the seven seals and the first six trumpets. In his comment on Revelation 11:18, he states: “The Day of Wrath has *only now come* (11:18 ). This means that nothing that precedes in the Seals and Trumpets can rightfully be regarded as wrath” (*ibid.*, p. 119). He further defines the tribulation as equivalent to divine wrath: “Let us get clearly in mind the *nature of the Tribulation*, that it is divine ‘wrath’ (11:18 ; 14:8, 10, 19 ; 15:1, 7 ; 16:1, 19 ) and divine ‘judgment’ (14:7 ; 15:4 ; 16:7 ; 17:1 ; 18:10 ; 19:2 )” (*ibid.*, p. 120). In both instances where Harrison gives extended lists of references to “wrath” in Revelation (*ibid.*, pp. 91,120) he, with evident purpose, omits Revelation 6:16-17 and Revelation 7:14. The former passage refers to wrath in connection with the sixth seal, and the latter is the only reference to the “great tribulation” by that title in the entire book. Both of these passages fall in the section of Revelation which deals with the period preceding the trumpets.

The explanation given of the reference to “wrath” in Revelation 6:16-17 is certainly inadequate for such a crucial issue. Harrison interprets the sixth seal “as reaching to the day of Wrath” (*ibid.*, p. 91), as if it were a future instead of aorist as it is in the text. No Greek tense would be more inappropriate to express this idea of Harrison’s than the aorist, which usually is punctiliar as to kind of action, and present or past as to time. If “the great day of their Wrath is come” (Rev 6:17), it certainly cannot be postponed as to its beginning until after the seventh seal is opened and seven trumpets of various judgments are poured out upon the earth.

Not only does Harrison exclude wrath, but the first three and one-half years are declared a relatively pleasant time. Harrison writes: “The first half of the week, or period of seven years, was a ‘sweet’ anticipation to John, as it is to them; under treaty protection, they [Israel] will be ‘sitting pretty,’ as we say. But the second half—‘bitter’ indeed...” (*ibid.*, p. 111). Pretribulationists could accept the teaching that the first three and one-half years of Daniel’s seventieth week is a time of protection for Israel, but they do not find this period described in Revelation 6—11 .

Even a casual reading of the seals and first six trumpets will make clear that the great tribulation begins with the early seals, not with the seventh trumpet. Certainly famine (Rev 6:5-6), death for one-fourth of the world’s population (Rev 6:8), earthquakes, stars falling from heaven, the moon becoming as blood, and every mountain and island being moved out of their places (Rev 6:12-14) portray indeed “the great day of their wrath”—the “wrath of the Lamb” (Rev 6:16-17). This is no period of “‘sweet’ anticipation to John” (*loc. cit.*), but the unprecedented time of trouble. Add to this the first six trumpets with their bloodshed, destruction on the earth and the sea, and poisoning of the rivers with the result that “many men died” (Rev 8:11), climaxed by the great woes of Revelation 9—10 , and one has a picture of great tribulation such as the world has never experienced. According to Scripture, at that time “their torment” will be “as the torment of a scorpion, when it striketh a man” (Rev 9:5). Some will seek death in vain in order to escape (Rev 9:10). In the sixth seal, one-third of the remaining earth’s population will be killed. If language means anything, this is the predicted time of unprecedented trouble.

Midtribulationists are obliged not only to explain away the explicit reference to wrath in connection with the sixth seal (Rev 6:16-17), but they must also slide over the only specific reference to the “great tribulation” in the entire Book of Revelation (7:14 ). This is made into a prophetic vision of the time to follow the tribulation. In the light of these references to wrath and great tribulation in a context as frightfully graphic as the events of the seals and first six trumpets, it should be obvious that the very foundation of the midtribulation theory is built upon sand. Few theories are more openly contradicted by the very Scriptures from which support is expected.

The efforts to evade these graphic Scriptures force midtribulationists to spiritualize and thereby nullify the force of these judgments. Harrison attempts to find fulfillment of the trumpet judgments in the events of World War II. He states in reference to the second trumpet, “The ‘great mountain burning with fire’ seems a clear reference to Germany, suddenly ‘cast

into the sea' of nations..." (*ibid.*, p. 218). In the same paragraph he then suddenly makes "the sea" a literal sea in which literal ships are sunk: "The further reference to 'sea' and 'ships' (8:9 ) must betaken literally..." (*loc. cit.*). It should be obvious that this interpretation also calls for a chronology in which the seventh trumpet will sound within a few years thereafter, involving a date-setting for the rapture which subsequent history has proven an error.

The evident fallacy of the whole midtribulation interpretation of Revelation 1—11 is that this view forces a spiritualization of the entire passage to find contemporary rather than future fulfillment. In doing so, a strained exegesis of the passages is achieved which is subjective and arbitrary. Even a simple reading of this section will give an impression of vivid divine judgment upon a sinful world which transcends anything which history has recorded. If the passage is intended to be taken with any serious literalness, its fulfillment is yet future.

The great tribulation actually begins in Revelation 6, not in Revelation 11. The seventh trumpet marks a point near its end, not its beginning. Posttribulationists make the seventh trumpet the end of the tribulation (cf. Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, p. 73). This is accomplished by ignoring the fact that the seven vials of judgment follow the seventh trump. It is curious, however, that both of these opponents of pretribulationism adopt such opposite views of the seventh trump, and, in effect, cancel out each other.

## Is the Rapture of the Church in Revelation 11?

At no point does the midtribulation view manifest its dogmatism more than in the interpretation of Revelation 11. One midtribulationist contends for the view that the great tribulation is the first part of Daniel's seventieth week, that the rapture occurs in the middle of the week after this tribulation, and that the last half of the week is the beginning of the Day of the Lord. The rapture according to this view takes place at the sixth seal of Revelation 6:12-17 (cf. H. W. H., *The Church and the Great Tribulation*, 46 pp). This point of view is actually a variation of posttribulationism and is peculiar to the author. The more normal position for midtribulationism is to place the rapture at Revelation 11.

J.Oliver Buswell has expressed the midtribulation position in the following statement: "I do not believe that the Church will go through any part of that period which the Scripture specifically designates as the wrath of God, but I do believe that the abomination of desolation will be a specific signal for a hasty flight followed by a very brief but a very terrible persecution, and that followed very quickly by the rapture of the Church *preceding* the outpouring of the vials of the wrath of God" (extract from letter published in *Our Hope*, LVI, June, 1950, 720).

We are indebted to Norman B. Harrison for the most explicit exposition of this teaching. His interpretation of Revelation 11 claims that "all the elements involved in the Coming are here" (*op. cit.*, p. 117). He submits the following tabulation:

Rev 11:3	The Witnesses	Acts 1:8
11:4	The Spirit	Acts 1:8; 2 Thess 2:7
Moses-Elijah	The Two Classes	"Dead"—"Alive"
11:7-10	The Dead	1 Thess 4:13-14
11:11	The Resurrection	1 Thess 4:16
11:12	The Cloud	Acts 1:9-11; 1 Thess 4:17
11:12	The Great Voice	1 Thess 4:16
11:12	The Ascension	1 Thess 4:16-17
11:15	The Trumpet	1 Thess 4:16
11:15-17	The Kingdom Received	Luke 19:15
11:18	The Servants Rewarded	Luke 19:15-17
11:18	The Time of Wrath	Rev 3:10-11
11:19	The Temple in Heaven	1 Cor 3:16

This tabulation (*ibid.*, p. 117) is supplemented by the discussion which brings out the midtribulation interpretation. The two witnesses are symbolic of Moses and Elijah, “represent the Law and the Prophets” and more specifically according to their description in Revelation 11 as “two olive trees and two candlesticks” (Rev 11:4) they represent the witness of the saints of the Old and New Covenant (*ibid.*, pp. 114-15). Harrison is not too clear as to his precise definition, and seems to waver between the idea that the two witnesses represent all the saints, especially Jew and Gentile, and the idea that they represent Moses and Elijah, viz., “The Two Classes ‘Dead’—‘Alive’” (*ibid.*, p. 117). By this, apparently, he means that the two witnesses are the living church and the resurrected saints at the time of the rapture. He states, “Now, if the two witnesses are symbolic of a ‘larger company of witnesses,’ then their resurrection and ascension must be symbolic of the resurrection and rapture of that larger company” (*ibid.*, pp. 116-17).

This interpretation is supplemented by further identification of “the cloud” as symbolic of the rapture: “‘The Cloud’ (11:12) is a definite reference to the Lord’s presence-parousia” (*ibid.*, p. 117). Because the future tense is omitted in the description of Christ in Revelation 11:17, Harrison concludes, “It seeks to tell us: *He has come*” (*ibid.*, p. 118). The reference to the “reign” of Christ is declared by Harrison to be future, not present, as the third woe, viz., the vials, must be first poured out (*loc. cit.*). The statement, “thy wrath came” (Rev 11:18, A.S.V.) is interpreted, on the basis of the Authorized translation, “thy wrath is come,” as “has *only now come* (11:18). This means that nothing that precedes in the Seals and Trumpets can rightfully be regarded as wrath” (*loc. cit.*). Harrison overlooks that the verb “came” is in the aorist which emphasizes the fact but not the time of the action. It could just as well refer to the whole course of the wrath of God in the seals and preceding trumpets.

His interpretation of the opening of the temple (Rev 11:19) is that it “is a further reference to the Rapture. ‘Know ye not that ye are the temple of God?’” (*ibid.*, p. 119). Just how the church can be “opened in heaven” he does not explain. The concluding identification is that the “seventh Trumpet sounds for the pouring of the Bowls of wrath. While it brings glory to the Church, it brings Woe (the third) to the world” (*loc. cit.*). The church goes through two woes which are not to be identified with the great tribulation, but not through the third woe which is so identified.

The fallacy of this entire exegesis of the passage is that there is no positive evidence that any of the identifications are correct. Similarities do not prove identity. The character of the two witnesses seems to indicate that they are actual individuals, not representatives of all the saints living and dead. The saints as a whole do not perform the miracles nor the witness designated of them (Rev 11:5-6). Nor are all the saints, especially the resurrected saints, killed by the beast. If all the saints are killed, then none would be living to be raptured. If the witnesses are only symbols, how can symbols be literally killed and lie in literal streets? Do the saints as a whole have men look on their “dead bodies” for “three days and a half,” refusing them burial in a tomb (Rev 11:9)? The other identifications are just as strained and unsustained by the text. Sounded by angels. The trumpet at the rapture is the “trump of God.” The trumpets of Revelation are all connected with divine judgment upon sin and unbelief. The trump of 1 Thessalonians 4 and of 1 Corinthians 15 is a call to the elect, an act of grace, a command to the dead to rise.

The most damaging fact in the whole argument, however, is that the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11 is, after all, not the last trumpet of Scripture. According to Matthew 24:31, the elect will be gathered at the coming of Christ to establish His earthly kingdom “with a great sound of a trumpet.” While posttribulationists hold that this is identical with the seventh trumpet, midtribulationists cannot do so. In fact, it is not too much to say that this one reference alone spells the doom of midtribulationism.

The use of “last” in reference to the trumpet of 1 Corinthians 15 is easily explained without resorting to the extremities of midtribulationism. H. A. Ironside interprets it as a familiar military expression: “When a Roman camp was about to be broken up, whether in the middle of the night or in the day, a trumpet was sounded. The first blast meant, ‘Strike tents and prepare to depart.’ The second meant, ‘Fall into line,’ and when what was called ‘the last trump’ sounded it meant, ‘March away.’” (*Addresses on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 529). The last trump of God for the church, following the gospel call and call to preparation, will be the call to go to be with the Lord. Whether or not this explanation be accepted, it illustrates that there is no necessity of relating a trump for the church with trumpets of judgment upon the unsaved. Each

trumpet must be related to its own order. Any child in school knows that the last bell for one hour may be followed by a first bell for the next hour. “Last” must be understood then to relate to the time order indicated by the context.

Midtribulationists are therefore unjustified in making the identification of the seventh trumpet with the last trumpet of 1 Corinthians. The seventh trumpet is not the last trump of Scripture anyway, and the events which they claim are related to it actually occur before the seventh trumpet is sounded according to the chronology of Revelation 11. On no point does the identification commend itself.

## **Do the Programs for Israel and the Church Overlap?**

Another objection to the midtribulation interpretation is that it confuses Israel and the church and requires an overlap of their two programs. Harrison’s argument that the existence of the temple to A.D. 70 proves that Israel’s program and that of the church overlaps is entirely untenable (cf. Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-53). According to Scripture the dispensation of the law ended at the cross (2 Cor 3:11; Gal 3:25; Col 2:14). Most students of the seventy weeks of Daniel who believe the seventieth week is future also believe that the sixty-ninth week was fulfilled prior to the crucifixion of Christ. Israel’s program is therefore at a standstill and the continued existence of the temple had no relevance. Israel as a people and nation have continued throughout the present age, but their predicted program has made no specific progress since Pentecost. The necessity for such an overlapping program is not inherent in Scriptural revelation, but only a necessary adjunct of midtribulation interpretation.

## **Is the Hope of the Imminent Return of Christ Unscriptural?**

One of the important reasons why pretribulationists believe the refutation of midtribulationism is necessary is that it directly attacks the imminency of the Lord’s return for the church much in the same fashion as is true in posttribulationism. Midtribulationism has this added feature, however, which is most objectionable: it sets up a definite chronology requiring date-setting. The events of the first three and one-half years of Daniel’s prophecy are specific. They begin with a covenant between a Gentile ruler and Israel in which Israel is promised protection and Palestine becomes their national home. Such a covenant could not be a secret by its very nature as it would be heralded throughout Jewry and be of great interest to the entire world. Such a covenant would, on the one hand, make the coming of Christ impossible for three and one-half years, according to the midtribulationist, and, on the other hand, make an imminent coming impossible at any time prior to the covenant. If the restrainer of 2 Thessalonians is the Holy Spirit, it also sets up an impossible chronology—the Holy Spirit taken out of the world before the church is.

The date-setting character of midtribulationism is manifest in Harrison’s exposition. He identifies World War I specifically “as that which our Lord Jesus envisioned, distinguishing it from other wars through the years...” (*ibid.*, p. 20). His calculations are detailed: “The evidence that the War Trumpets of Revelation 8 found their realization, initially at least, in World War II is striking and conclusive. Here are a few marks of identification (will the reader please familiarize himself with chapter 8): 1—*Its Origin* (vs. 1)—the Trumpets proceed from the Seals. World War II definitely grew out of World War I—practically but a second stage. 2—*Its Timing* (vs. 1)—‘about the space of half an hour.’ Some time notes are merely general; this is specific. The key to divine reckoning is Peter’s ‘one day is with the Lord as a thousand years.’ A half-hour is 1/48th of a day; divided into 1,000 years it yields 20 years, 10 months. This is the ‘space’ of ‘silence’ between the wars. Reckoned from the armistice of Nov. 11, 1918, it brings us to Sept. 11, 1939. But it says ‘about’; World War II began Sept. 1, 1939; Hitler ‘jumped the gun’ by 10 days” (Harrison, *His Coming*, pp. 42-43). This far-fetched interpretation is its own refutation.

Harrison further identifies the second trumpet with Germany (*The End*, p. 218). It should be obvious, under his chronology, if this occurs during the first three and one-half years of Daniel’s last week, that the rapture is now long overdue. This refutation from history does not seem to deter midtribulationists, like another date-setters, from making alterations in their system and making another guess at identifying current events with the seals and trumpets of Revelation.

# Conclusion

To most students of prophecy, the midtribulation view falls for want of proof in its three strategic interpretations: its teaching that the great tribulation does not begin until the seventh trumpet, the identification of the seventh trumpet with the middle of the seventieth week of Daniel, and its further blunder of demanding identification of the seventh trumpet with the last trump of 1 Corinthians 15:52. Its arguments against imminency on other grounds (cf. Harrison, *The End*, pp. 231-33) are a repetition of familiar posttribulational arguments often refuted. While the question of the time of the return of the Lord for His church is not in itself a structural principle of theology as a whole, it certainly has a vital bearing on the interpretation of many Scriptures and is integral to the teaching of the imminency of the rapture. The great majority of expositors will continue to divide between the posttribulational and pretribulational positions, with the midtribulational and partial rapture viewpoints held only by a small minority.

Dallas, Texas

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# Millennial Series

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 30

### Part 30: Conclusion

#### Conclusion: Fifty Arguments for Pretribulationism

In previous discussion of premillennialism in relation to the tribulation, the respective arguments for pretribulationism, partial rapture, posttribulationism, and midtribulationism have been examined, and the pretribulationist position in general sustained. By way of conclusion and summary, some fifty arguments for pretribulationism can now be proposed. It is not presumed that the statement of these arguments in themselves establishes their validity, but rather that the previous discussion supports and justifies this summary of reasons for the pretribulationist view.

For the sake of brevity, the term *rapture* or *translation*

is used for the coming of Christ for His church, while the term *second coming* is uniformly used as a reference to His coming to the earth to establish His millennial kingdom, an event which all consider posttribulationist. While the words *rapture* and *translation* are not quite identical, they refer to the same event. By the term *rapture* reference is made to the fact that the church is “caught up” from the earth and taken to heaven. By the term *translation* the thought is conveyed that those who are thus raptured are transformed in their physical bodies from natural and corruptible bodies to spiritual, incorruptible, and immortal bodies. Strictly speaking, the dead are raised while the living are translated. In common usage, however, this distinction is not normally maintained.

In the discussion the posttribulationist view is considered the principal contender against pretribulationism and is primarily in mind in the restatement of the arguments. The other positions, however, are also mentioned in so far as they oppose pretribulationism on some special point. The preceding discussion has pointed to the preponderance of argument in support of the pretribulationist position, and the following restatement should serve to clarify the issues involved.

#### I. Historical Argument

1. The early church believed in the imminency of the Lord’s return, which is an essential doctrine of pretribulationism.
2. The detailed development of pretribulationist truth during the past few centuries does not prove that the doctrine is new or novel. Its development is similar to that of other major doctrines in the history of the church.

#### II. Hermeneutics

3. Pretribulationism is the only view which allows a literal interpretation of all Old and New Testament passages on the great tribulation.
4. Only pretribulationism distinguishes clearly between Israel and the church and their respective programs.

### **III. The Nature of the Tribulation**

5. Pretribulationism maintains the Scriptural distinction between the great tribulation and tribulation in general which precedes it.
6. The great tribulation is properly interpreted by pretribulationists as a time of preparation for Israel's restoration (Deut 4:29-30; Jer 30:4-11). It is not the purpose of the tribulation to prepare the church for glory.
7. None of the Old Testament passages on the tribulation mention the church (Deut 4:29-30; Jer 30:4-11; Dan 9:24-27; 12:1-2).
8. None of the New Testament passages on the tribulation mention the church (Matt 24:15-31; 1 Thess 1:9-10; 5:4-9; Rev 4—19).
9. In contrast to midtribulationism, the pretribulational view provides an adequate explanation for the beginning of the great tribulation in Revelation 6. Midtribulationism is refuted by the plain teaching of Scripture that the great tribulation begins long before the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11.
10. The proper distinction is maintained between the prophetic trumpets of Scripture by pretribulationism. There is no proper ground for the pivotal argument of midtribulationism that the seventh trumpet of Revelation is the last trumpet in that there is no established connection between the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11, the last trumpet of 1 Corinthians 15:52, and the trumpet of Matthew 24:31. They are three distinct events.
11. The unity of Daniel's seventieth week is maintained by pretribulationists. By contrast, midtribulationism destroys the unity of Daniel's seventieth week and confuses Israel's program with that of the church.

### **IV. The Nature of the Church**

12. The translation of the church is never mentioned in any passage dealing with the second coming of Christ after the tribulation.
13. The church is not appointed to wrath (Rom 5:9; 1 Thess 1:9-10; 5:9). The church therefore cannot enter "the great day of their wrath" (Rev 6:17).
14. The church will not be overtaken by the Day of the Lord (1 Thess 5:1-9) which includes the tribulation.
15. The possibility of a believer escaping the tribulation is mentioned in Luke 21:36.
16. The church of Philadelphia was promised deliverance from "the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon the earth" (Rev 3:10).
17. It is characteristic of divine dealing to deliver believers before a divine judgment is inflicted upon the world as illustrated in the deliverance of Noah, Lot, Rahab, etc. (2 Pet 2:6-9).
18. At the time of the translation of the church, all believers go to the Father's house in heaven, and do not remain on the earth as taught by posttribulationists (John 14:3).
19. Pretribulationism does not divide the body of Christ at the rapture on a works principle. The teaching of a partial rapture is based on the false doctrine that the translation of the church is a reward for good works. It is rather a climactic aspect of

salvation by grace.

20. The Scriptures clearly teach that all, not part, of the church will be raptured at the coming of Christ for the church (1 Cor 15:51-52; 1 Thess 4:17).

21. As opposed to a view of a partial rapture, pretribulationism is founded on the definite teaching of Scripture that the death of Christ frees from all condemnation.

22. The godly remnant of the tribulation are pictured as Israelites, not members of the church as maintained by the posttribulationists.

23. The pretribulational view as opposed to posttribulationism does not confuse general terms like *elect* and *saints* which apply to the saved of all ages with specific terms like the *church* and those *in Christ* which refer to believers of this age only.

## V. The Doctrine of Immmency

24. The pretribulational interpretation is the only view which teaches that the coming of Christ is actually imminent.

25. The exhortation to be comforted by the coming of the Lord (1 Thess 4:18) is significant only in the pretribulational view, and is especially contradicted by posttribulationism. continues in sin, while at the second coming the world is judged and righteousness is established in the earth.

44. The translation of the church is pictured as a deliverance before the day of wrath, while the second coming is followed by the deliverance of those who have believed in Christ during the tribulation.

45. The rapture is described as imminent, while the second coming is preceded by definite signs.

46. The translation of living believers is truth revealed only in the New Testament, while the second coming with its attendant events is a prominent doctrine of both Testaments.

47. The rapture concerns only the saved, while the second coming deals with both saved and unsaved.

48. At the rapture Satan is not bound, while at the second coming Satan is bound and cast into the abyss.

49. No unfulfilled prophecy stands between the church and the rapture, while many signs must be fulfilled before the second coming.

50. No passage dealing with the resurrection of saints at the second coming in either Testament ever mentions a translation of living saints at the same time.

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