

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Theological Antecedents of Pretribulationism

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According to many contemporary theologians, Biblical statements on Christ's second coming do not refer to the future of the world, but to the present inner experience of individuals. For evangelicals, on the other hand, Christ's return to earth is future and literally understood. As truly as our Lord appeared in the flesh the first time, He will appear in the flesh a "second time" (Heb. 9:28). In the same way that He ascended into heaven, He will come again (Acts 1:11). To accept the New Testament as normative is to accept its teaching on Christ's return, for that teaching pervades the whole book from Matthew to Revelation. Biblically the belief in Christ's literal return—not the denial of it—gives meaningful purpose to our existence here and now.

Because the "blessed hope" impinges upon the believer's present experience, differences of opinion surrounding it may involve intense feelings. And differences there are, even among those who share belief in a literal second coming. They may agree that prior to our Lord's return a period of great tribulation will envelop the world. But differences arise regarding the time of the rapture. Will believers in the churches be caught up in the air to meet Christ before the tribulation, during the tribulation, or after it? Can the rapture happen of any moment? Or must some part of the tribulation transpire first? For some the rapture is pretribulational, for others midtribulational, or posttribulational.

What difference does it make? Depending upon one's answer, he will prepare at any moment for the possibility either of meeting Christ, or of facing world-wide devastation. Peace-loving souls may wish to avoid the issue, but sooner or later a student of Scripture must answer it. We cannot long consider the Bible's teaching about things to come without placing the various events in some order. Of course, we cannot set dates. Just as clearly we cannot ignore the ordering of eschatological events. And the reader is asked to examine afresh a pretribulational rapture of the church.

Because last things succeed past and present things, one's whole Biblical perspective of human history is involved in the rapture question. Pretribulationism is associated with a dispensational system of theology. Midtribulationism and posttribulationism are often at least suspected of some measure of alignment with covenant theology. In the interest of clarity, discussions of the rapture must consider something of the relationship

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between covenant theology and dispensationalism. We may then be in a position to assess the theological context of pretribulationism in premillennialism and dispensational premillennialism.

I. COVENANT THEOLOGY

The major unifying concept of Scripture, according to covenant theology, is not divine dispensations, but divine covenants. And the covenants stressed are two: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace (sometimes differently named).¹ The essential elements of the covenants may be seen in the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Under the covenant of works, God and Adam are the parties involved. The condition for righteousness is obedience, and the reward for disobedience is death. God and Christ for sinners are the parties involved in the execution of the covenant of grace. The condition is faith in Christ for which the reward is eternal life.

Subsumed under the covenant of grace are numerous subordinate covenants, such as those with Abraham and David. It may be pointed out that Baptists who have held to a covenant theology, like Charles Haddon Spurgeon, do not consider that the physical children of believers are included in the covenant until they themselves meet its condition of faith. The true seed of Abraham are so not by birth, but by faith (Rom. 9:8; Gal. 3:26, 29).

The major emphasis of covenant theology falls upon the one basis of salvation for sinners of all times in Christ. Old Testament people of God exercised the same faith (Heb. 11), accepted the same promises (Rom. 4:13), and shared the same spiritual life as illustrated by the one olive tree (Rom. 11). Therefore, Old and New Testament believers compose one spiritual temple built on one foundation (Eph. 2:11–22).

Because of this spiritual unity, covenant theologians generally think they are justified in interpreting all the promises to Israel as fulfilled in the church, and often do not anticipate a historical millennium. On the same basis, inferences are justified from the circumcision of infants in Israel to the baptism of infants in the church today. In so stressing similarities, covenant theologians tend to overlook important differences. Granting but one plan of individual salvation in all ages, the differences between national Israel and institutional churches are not duly acknowledged.

¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 265, 270.

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II. DISPENSATIONALISM

Dispensationalism agrees that the plan of salvation by faith on the basis of Christ's work is the same in all ages.² This agreement with covenant theology was not often emphasized before the publication of a recent article in *Bibliotheca Sacra*. In January, 1963, President Roy L. Aldrich of Detroit Bible College proposed "A New Look at Dispensationalism." He found six significant points of agreement with covenant theologians. (1) Both could agree on the meaning of a dispensation "as a period of time during which a particular revelation of God's will has been operative." (2) Bible history since Moses must be divided into at least two such dispensations. Admittedly, "Some of the seven dispensations outlined by many dispensationalists may be only covenant historical divisions." Allowing for predictions about the future kingdom, he concluded that ninety per cent of the Bible deals with the two dispensations which are not in dispute. (3) Dr. Aldrich found agreement on the assertion of only one way of salvation since the fall. And he warned that the erroneous teaching of some ultradispensationalists should not be attributed to all. Salvation, he said, has always been by grace through faith, and rests upon the basis of the shed blood of Christ. This is not essentially different from the covenant theologian's covenant of grace. (4) Both schools of thought agree that the new birth is characteristic of every period since the fall. (5) Moral law applies in every dispensation. Whether viewed as the principles of the Ten Commandments, or the unchanging expression of God's moral nature, the moral law of God is inescapable in every age. (6) Having a common wonderful Savior, "the saints of all dispensations have far more in common than in difference."³

While applauding the irenic spirit which points up these highly significant similarities, we cannot forget the remaining differences. Individuals in Israel were saved on the same basis as individuals now in the church, but collectively Israel and the church have distinct temporal goals.⁴ The goal for the Israelites included sociopolitical theocracy, while the goal for the church requires its separation from the state. Churches are gathered fellowships of Spirit-born and Spirit-gifted believers existing for the edification of members and the evangelization of the lost. For Israel's purpose, offices of civil government were necessary; for the church's purpose, the officers are pastors and deacons with the help of evangelists, teachers, and other missionaries throughout the world.

² Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 110–31.

³ Roy L. Aldrich, "A New Look at Dispensationalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, January 1963, pp. 42–49.

⁴ Ernest Pickering, "The Nature of Covenant Theology," *Central Conservative Baptist Quarterly*, III, Winter 1960, pp. 1–8.

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The distinction between Israel and the church is further indicated in the fact that during Christ's ministry the church was yet to be built (Matt. 16:18). The Spirit's baptism of believers into this body remained future after Christ's resurrection (Acts 1:5). The "beginning" occurred on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 11:15). In none of the New Testament epistles do the churches sustain Moses' civil law or offices. A clear distinction between Israel and the church, Dr. Charles C. Ryrie points out, is the "essence" of dispensationalism.⁵

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Consequently, dispensationalists may deny the necessity of inferences from institutional Israel to the institutional church (in support of infant baptism). Individual spiritual life received by faith is the same in all ages, and dispensationalists may not always see the significance of their own statements to this effect. But granting the similarity to the fullest degree, differences remain in various ages on the implementation of God's temporal purposes collectively.

This significant difference between Israel and the church rules out the possibility of applying Israel's promises of national restoration to the church at present. And granting the distinction between Israel and the church, it is meaningful to ask whether in the future there may be a change from New Testament church implementation of God's collective purposes to a sociopolitical kingdom again.

III. PREMILLENNIALISM

That there is to be a future sociopolitical kingdom is opposed primarily by amillennialists. However, amillennialists agree that Christ's return to defeat the hosts of wickedness (Rev. 19:11) is to be literally interpreted. Since Christ literally returns, why should He not literally reign (Rev. 20:1-7)? But amillennialists do not interpret Revelation 19 and 20 in chronological succession. Rather, they hold that we have a series of progressively parallel passages, each beginning with the start of the present dispensation, and each culminating at its end with the battle of Armageddon, the final judgment, and the eternal state. The events of Revelation 20 on this showing do not follow those of Revelation 19, but start at the beginning of our age. Merrill Tenney notes that the case for regarding the various sections concurrent depends upon the particular divisions which are assigned to the book and this, of course, is subject to some debate. Tenney finds the theory of a division at the end of Revelation 19 less than compelling. If we take any references to judgment as was suggested to determine the end of each of these sections, it seems to be circular. That the judgment is the end of history and that, therefore, there can be no millennium is the point to be proved, rather than assumed.

⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

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The vision in 17:1 through 21:8, Professor Tenney says, seems to be a unit which conveys the impression that the events it chronicles are successive.⁶ Even though the terms may be symbolic, they represent a series of acts which take place in the order listed. So on the chronological and the futuristic view we have (1) the binding of Satan, (2) the first resurrection, (3) Christ's reigning for a thousand years, (4) the second resurrection, (5) the loosing and final doom of Satan, (6) the great white throne judgment, (7) the new heaven and the new earth. What reasons may be given for this chronological viewpoint? D. H. Kromminga, late premillennial Reformed writer, in his book *The Millennium*, suggests that we take this chronologically:⁷ (1) Since the binding and loosing of Satan are consecutive, the 1000 years that intervene must be in sequence, and (2) chapter 20 finishes a story begun in chapter 12 of the great delusion of the nations by means of the two beasts. In order to deny a future millennium, Kromminga argues, the amillennialists disrupt the story of Satanic deception as it unfolds in chapters 12–20 and shift his activity from accusing the brethren in Christ's heavenly presence to the earth and its inhabitants. From this activity he is bound for a thousand years and afterward loosed for a season in which he again deceives the nations of Gog and Magog. So from such a literal perspective premillennialists establish a future, personal reign of Christ on earth.

It may be asked whether Christ will actually rule on this earth. Revelation 5:10 does teach a reign "on earth." It would be more in context to take it of the earth as we now know it rather than the "new earth" first mentioned in Revelation 21:1. Numbers of other New Testament passages teach the rule of Christians with their Lord (1 Cor. 6:2–3; Luke 22:28–30; 2 Tim. 2:11–12). In all of these their rule with Christ is not in the present age but future. We are now priests, but we do not now enjoy the dominion or rulership which awaits the redemption of our bodies. This future ruling implies a political kingdom which we do not now have in the church. At present, then, these promises are not actually fulfilled.

The temporal period mentioned six times in Revelation 20 is one thousand years. On a basically literal approach it could be precisely that—a thousand years and not the whole period from the first coming to the second. Or, it could be a future period of time of great length. However, it can hardly be a figurative expression for perfection. Two distinct resurrections are separated by this period of time.

The passage refers to people "living again" with the risen Christ. If resurrection is meant in verse 5 then that would seem clearly to be what was intended in verse 4. The word *souls* admittedly does have this possibility of including the body with the spirit. Two distinct resurrections are no more impossible theologically than two distinct comings of Jesus Christ. Amillennialists often stress a single judgment of the righteous and the

⁶ Merrill Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, pp. 88–89.

⁷ D. H. Kromminga, *The Millennium*, pp. 28–31.

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unrighteous. But this passage does seem to separate them by a definite period of time. Furthermore, resurrection of believers is a resurrection out from among the dead (*ex*), out from their midst (Luke 20:35–36; Acts 4:2; Phil. 3:11). And there is the mention of the resurrection of the just (Luke 14:14) and the resurrection of life (John 5:29).

What purpose would this millennial period serve? Why could not all this take place, say, in the eternal state? For one thing, it completes the redemption which Christ began here upon this earth rather than the new earth. As yet we wait for the redemption of this body, and the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now waiting for the release which is coming at the resurrection of the just (Rom. 8:18–23). Christ's work of redemption removes not only the guilt of our sin, and the power of sin, but also the curse that was put upon this world. Thus Christ brings to completion a very purposeful philosophy of history. We may anticipate a day of peace with justice on this earth, with nations as we now know them. Plato's great ideal of a philosopher-king will be realized in the Lord Jesus Christ's perfect rule. And historic premillennialism provides not only a fitting climax for history, but also an appropriate vestibule or transition to the eternal state.

IV. DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM

Dispensational premillennialists also see this as the time of the distinctive fulfillment of the Old Testament promises to Israel. All that I have said thus far does not require that Israel be pre-eminent or that Christ reign from Jerusalem. There are these possibilities: (1) that God's dealing is completely personal and a restoration of Israel is unthinkable, or (2) that Israel would be converted en masse but not restored as a nation, or (3) that Israel be converted and restored and preeminent during the millennium.

Many dispensational premils take the last view. When they do, however, Israel is not given a place as an end in itself. Even Kromminga who denies a specifically Jewish character to the millennium says: "It is not inconceivable that in the millennium the people that sprang from Abraham were to render some spiritual service to the rest of the nations, as in consequence of and by their conversion to Christ they may easily do."⁸ Rene Pache in *The Return of Christ* maintains that the Israelites will be *effective* missionaries. He explains: "It may seem astonishing that even during the Messianic reign one nation should thus have pre-eminence over the others. Does not the Scripture say that in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female? That is true in what concerns salvation, but let us recall also that in the church and in the Christian family man still maintains authority over woman. The millennium will not yet be heaven, but rather a theocracy, an authoritarian reign of God on earth. It will therefore be useful that

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

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Israel in a holy and spiritual fashion be at the head of the people to submit them to the Lord.”⁹

Is a future earthly prominence of Israel Scriptural? In addition to Old Testament predictions, several New Testament passages teach this. According to Luke 1:32–33, Christ will receive the throne of His father David, and will reign over the house of Jacob forever. This *forever* would include the thousand-year period and more. According to Luke 22:29–30, Christ, the night before His crucifixion, told the disciples that in the future they would sit on thrones in the kingdom judging the twelve tribes of Israel. In Acts 1:6 when the disciples asked when the kingdom would be restored to Israel, they were told not that it could not be, but that they could not know the times and the seasons. Romans 11:25–26 would be interpreted with Alford, the Greek commentator, as dealing with nations: the Gentile nations and the Jewish nation. When Paul spoke of the fullness of the Gentile nations coming in and of all Israel being saved, he had no regard for the time to the destinies of individual Gentiles or Jews. The full number, the totality of nations, in every nation under heaven, are the prophetic subjects of the preaching of the gospel. So the idea of an elect number, however true in itself, does not seem to belong to this passage. “All Israel shall be saved,” refers to Israel as a nation, not alone to some particular individuals. And the nation is not Anglo-Israel (Britain and America). It is literal Israel.

While no explicit emphasis on Israel appears in Revelation 19–20, the passage is connected with the Jewish restoration by an allusion to Isaiah 11:3–5. Isaiah says that the branch of Jesse by the breath of his mouth shall slay the wicked. This is yet future according to 2 Thessalonians 2:8 and it comes to pass in Revelation 19:15, 21. In the mind of John’s readers who were acquainted with the Old Testament, this implied all of the context of Isaiah 11:4–9. We ought to remind ourselves of that context. After Christ slays the wicked by the sword proceeding out of His mouth, He will reign in righteousness (vs. 5), the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and a little child shall lead them (vs. 6). The curse will be removed from nature which is now red with tooth and claw. “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain” (vs. 9). Furthermore the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (vs. 9). By employing a phrase from this context, John identifies his millennium with that of Isaiah.

The reign of the branch of Jesse portrayed in Isaiah 11 is surely to be identified with the exaltation of the Lord’s house on mount Zion in Jerusalem, according to Isaiah 2:1–5. Does the reign of universal peace literally center on mount Zion? The parallel passage in

⁹ Rene Pache, *The Return of Christ*, p. 418.

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Micah 4:1–7 provides the context for an answer. The mountain of the Lord's house to be established according to Micah 4 is the same mountain destroyed according to the preceding verses in Micah 3:8–12. Judgment is pronounced upon the sin of Jacob, Israel, Zion, and Jerusalem (3:8–12). Then the verse immediately preceding the account of its restoration and glory says: "Zion shall be plowed as a field and Jerusalem shall become heaps." If we can apply the succeeding verses relating to Zion's exaltation to the church, it would seem that we must also apply the verses on judgment to the church. But no one does that. The evidence indicates that there will be a literal millennium with Jerusalem and Jews prominent (Jewish prominence is consistent with Daniel's predictive visions also, as Robert D. Culver shows.¹⁰ Would anyone want to suggest as more fitting than Jerusalem for Christ's headquarters; Salt Lake City, Rome, Washington, Moscow, or Mecca?

In sum, we have found that: (1) dispensationalism (and so pretribulationism) teaches that individual salvation in any age is always by God's grace through faith on the basis of Christ's atonement, (2) dispensationalism (and pretribulationism) affirm that in different periods of time believers collectively accomplish distinct temporal purposes through institutions as different as national Israel and local churches, (3) local churches, however, are not the last institution God employs, for after Christ's return He will rule a sociopolitical kingdom, (4) Christ's rule on the throne of David will be headquartered in Jerusalem and give an instrumental prominence to the Jewish people.

These four doctrines do not render a pretribulationist view of the rapture logically necessary, but they are its usual antecedents. Given these tenets, the pretribulationist rapture of the church is a meaningful possibility. So we have reasons to examine evidence indicating whether or not it will be a future actuality.¹¹

¹⁰ Robert D. Culver, *Daniel and the Latter Days*.

¹¹ Lewis, G. R. (1968). "Theological Antecedents of Pretribulationism." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 125, 129–138.